

Tis the Season for Winter Squash

By John Rizzo

For nearly 10,000 years, winter squash has been consumed throughout the Americas. Originally it was harvested for its seeds; the flesh was bitter and thin. Better varieties were later developed with bulky, sweeter flesh. The Native Americans embraced it and even buried it with their dead for nourishment in the afterlife.

I was surprised to learn how many people are somewhat intimidated to purchase it in fear of not knowing what to do with it. I can honestly tell you that it's pretty hard to screw it up. You can bake it with the skin, without the skin, in the oven, in boiling water, steam or microwave it. It's actually very easy to work with and I'll give the tips you need to buy and prepare it.

Butternut and Acorn squash are probably the most common varieties in the local market. They make a good choice for almost all winter squash recipes and can often be used interchangeably. When choosing your squash look for one whose rind is deep in color yet dull in appearance. The rind should be free of cracks and should not have any soft spots; that's where they are likely to mold. It should also be hard and should not be easily scraped with your fingernail. Choose one that is heavy and dense, and if it has a stem, even better.

Winter squash can keep for several months if properly stored, ideally between 50° and 60°. But once it's cut, it needs to be refrigerated.

Begin preparing the squash by cutting it in half with a large French knife or cleaver. Scrape the seeds out of the cavity with a spoon and remove any stringy fiber. At this point you can do pretty much anything with it. You can cut it into portions and steam or microwave for several minutes until tender, coat it with a sugar glaze or maple syrup and broil it until it begins to brown. Or it can be peeled, cubed, steamed, and then pureed with a little salt, butter, brown sugar and cinnamon. Now if you're really up for a creative way to prepare your squash, try the soup recipe below.

Winter Squash Bisque

Yield: 8 Cups

Winter Squash, Peeled and Cubed	4 Cups
Margarine	2 TBL
Onion, Diced 1/4 inch	1/2 Cup
Tomato Paste	1/2 Cup
Dry Sherry	2 TBL
Chicken Stock	3 Cups
Whole Milk, Scalded	1.5 Cups
Cornstarch	3 TBL
Cinnamon	1 1/3 tsp
Curry Powder (optional)	1/2 tsp

In a saucepan, cover the squash with Chicken Stock and bring to a boil. Continue to simmer for approximately ½ hour or until tender. Strain squash and reserve the liquid.

Mash or whip the cooked squash until smooth. In a clean saucepan, sauté the onions in margarine. Add reserved chicken stock, squash, tomato paste and sherry. Bring to a boil and reduce heat. Let simmer for approximately one hour.

Add the scalded milk and curry powder. Mix cornstarch with a small amount of water and thicken soup until it reaches a smooth, velvety texture. Season with salt and pepper and cook on low heat for an additional five minutes. Do not bring the soup back to a boil or the milk will curdle.