

Squash: It's not just a racquet sport

By ANNE HARVEY

The cast of characters has humorous names like 'patty pan', 'yellow crookneck', 'yellow straightneck' and 'zucchini' (also known in France and the United Kingdom as 'Courgette'). Their flavor is light and sweet with flesh as delicate as a flower and texture that makes it almost melt in the mouth. The many types and varieties offer the cook countless opportunities to prepare a varied menu of colorful summer dishes. Farmers markets are the best source of the freshest squashes and frequently offer unique varieties as well as those organically grown.

Summer squashes, and winter squashes too, are native to the Americas and belong to the family of curcubita. Archaeologists have traced their origins to Mexico, dating back from 7,000 to 5,500 BCE, when they were an integral part of the ancient diet of corn (maize), beans, and squashes. That pre-Columbian food trio is still the mainstay of the Mexican cuisine and is known today as the "three sisters."

Zucchini is the most common of this area's summer squashes. It has a dark green and yellow skin and is shaped like a cucumber. This ubiquitous vegetable is best picked at 7 to 8-inches long.

Pattypan squash is pale green or yellow round, flat and scalloped. It should be harvested at 3 days to a week old. It has a nutty flavor.

Crookneck squash is round with a tapering, curved neck and a bumpy, golden-yellow skin. As a child, I thought Crooknecks looked like hand grenades from a Dr. Seuss story (but of course

he eschewed violent toys). Crooknecks are best picked when 6-inches long. Use in soups, stews, baked or steamed.

Sunburst squash is smooth, yellow and acorn shaped. It is small, delicate and mild tasting; good as an appetizer with a dip.

Yellow squash looks like a yellow zucchini.

Chayote squash is pale green, pear shaped and has a single, edible seed.

Opo or **Asian squash** is similar to zucchini. It is very good in stir fries. It must be consumed when very young and tender or it becomes bitter.

Zucchini is the tender, sweet, immature fruit of the Curcubita pepo. It is eaten in its entirety. If left on the vine or bush the fruit becomes

enormous, the seeds large, tough and sometimes inedible, and the flavor less sweet. 'Cocozelle', a variety of zucchini that originated in Italy, is shorter, plumper, and striped. Today's farmers are developing hybrids that are a visual delight. Some are round, some are yellow, some a combination of green and yellow, and some are a cross between zucchini and the fluted patty pan squash.

Mention the Great Zucchini Glut of 1972 (have your family historians fill in the date for your local 'outbreak') and you're sure to get a laugh or a groan. In my family 1976 is the benchmark. Many families, and even a few gardeners, refer to this reputation for abundance with the explanation that "four zucchini plants are three too many." This isn't to malign this fine vegetable. It just means that if some is good, a ton more isn't necessarily embraced as a whole lot better. In fact, Zucchini plants are so prolific and easy to grow that many communities hold 'Sneak Some Zucchini Onto Your Neighbor's Porch Night,' or similar festivities near the end of summer.

Buy summer squash that is firm to the touch. If it feels soft, that means it is deteriorating. Larger squashes may have seeds that provide an unwanted texture in your dishes (but are excellent for stuffing or pureeing). Just rinse or wipe the squash; there is no need to peel summer squash. You may want to wash zucchini with a soft brush to remove the tiny bristles on the surface if they irritate the cook's hands. Summer squash dehydrates quickly. Store in a breathable plastic storage bag or wrapped in a towel in the hydrator drawer in the refrigerator for up to one

week.

If you are lucky enough to find squash blossoms, you can enjoy their exquisite fun. Blossoms are excellent stuffed with a goat, cream, or ricotta cheeses and herb stuffing. Then battered and fried. Mix water, flour, salt & pepper to a pancake consistency. If you want a fluffier batter add baking powder. Deep fry and eat them while hot. These treats taste like a hint of Zucchini with creamy texture and cheese quality. Blossoms also make a surprise wrapper for stuffing with a rice mixture. Stuff them with seasoned, cooked rice, put them in a casserole dish with a little seasoned chicken or vegetable broth and bake. Grate a little cheese on top 3 minutes before taking out of oven.

With their high water content (more than 95

percent), summer squashes are very low in calories. There are only 13 calories in a half-cup of raw squash, with a slight increase to 18 calories in the same quantity cooked. Nutritionally, summer squash offer valuable antioxidants. They also provide some beta-carotene, trace quantities of the B vitamins, folic acid, small amounts of vitamin C and calcium, and a healthy content of potassium

Try eating them raw. Cut zucchinis into strips

and include them in a platter of crudites or shred them into salads.


Prepare a salad from shredded zucchini and shredded carrots; add a dressing and enjoy.

Dice them and add to a chopped salad.

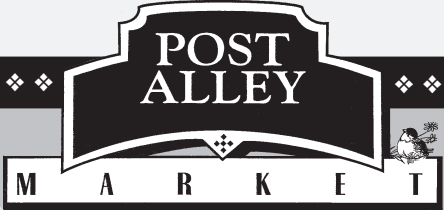
Puree them in the blender with a little water, and add seasoning to create a sauce

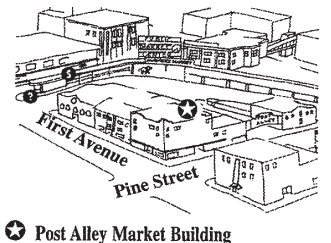
Mix squashes of various colors for an attractive presentation of bright yellow paired with light and dark green





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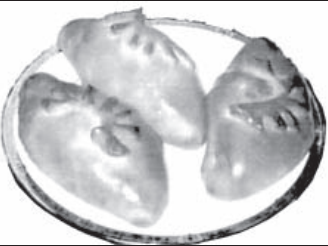
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