

*The Local Table*

# Inviting pumpkins to dinner

By ANNE HARVEY

Oh, so endearing is the 'punkin'! Halloween is nigh. Scoff at (or celebrate) the impending gloom of winter; carve a clutch of 'jack-o-lanterns,' bake spicy pumpkin pies and breads. If you don't know how much the average hippopotamus relishes pumpkins, show up at the Woodland park zoo, usually on November 1st, to watch them feast on big orange messy pumpkin treats like candy.

My weekly Community Sponsored Agriculture (CSA) basket is becoming suspiciously heavier each week as the winter squashes sneak in. For an easy meal, I love using Thai Green Curry paste and coconut milk to simmer the squash with potatoes and whatever other veggies, like green beans, are at hand. This is a delicious easy weeknight combination when served with basmati or jasmine rice and a little salad.

Another quick supper or lunch is pumpkin soup puree. Cut up a fresh pumpkin or other winter squash (any zaftig hard-shelled sweet beauty) into a good soup stock. While simmering, season with salt, pepper or other herbs or spices. When tender, puree the soup with a hand masher or use one of those cool electric blending wands. These are much safer and easier to clean up than pouring batches of hot soup into a food processor or blender. Ladle into bowls and add a swirl of sour cream or plain yogurt before serving.

At the other end of the winter-squash size spectrum are the fun, miniature, novelty squashes. In the middle size range are Kabocha, delicata, acorn, butternut, buttercup and turban. Some people enjoy using squashes as centerpiece decorations. Savvy vegetable-nistas couldn't imagine stopping there. To eat them is a must!

Despite the amazing diversity of appearances on the outside, most squash are similar in texture on the inside and can be used interchangeably in most recipes. The subtle variations in flavor can be a fun surprise. I couldn't believe the first time I tasted a 'pumpkin' pie baked with butternut squash.

The texture exception in the group is found in the fun 'spaghetti squash.' Pick up one of these yellow gems, bake it and scrape the tender strands of flesh out of the shell with a fork and

use as you would use pasta. Spaghetti squash is sweet and slightly crunchy and sure to please. This is a great squash for folks who can't abide the soft yielding fine texture of most cooked squash.

Picking out a great squash is easy. Any squash that looks firm and healthy will be fine. If you are going to store it, make sure it has no breaks in the skin. Winter squash will store at room temperature for at least a month. For longer storage, put the squash in a dry cool (40-50) but not cold location like an unheated enclosed porch or basement. Just watch out for the 'dry' requirement. This is not always easy to achieve here in Puget Sound. Ensuring good air circulation around each piece helps.

Kids love any squash served with a tiny dollop of butter and a spoonful of brown sugar or maple syrup. My teenagers welcome this treatment when I cook any of the little miniature pumpkin-shaped squashes, spoon the mix back into the shell and put the top on before serving: "Pots de Pumpkin."

There are many great recipes for hot roasted vegetable combinations that include squash that bring out the natural sugars and caramelize them deliciously. Squash puree also squeezes magically into quick or yeast breads, muffins, cookies, waffles or pancakes. They add a wonderful color, moisture and sweetness.

Another easy way to prepare winter squash is to split them in half lengthwise, scoop out any seeds and place face down on a cookie sheet or shallow pan. Bake about 40 minutes to one and one half hours depending on size. Add a little water add to pan to prevent the squash from drying out and to shorten the cooking time a little. The flesh can also be basted with herb seasoned oil or butter for a great flavor melding. Cook until very tender but not charred.

Excellent nutrition and storability make squash an important fall and winter vegetable for seasonal eaters. Winter squash has 10 times the vitamin A content of its summer squash relatives. It is also an excellent source of potassium, fiber and complex carbohydrates.

So, come down to the market, tuck a few of these cheery vegetables into your basket each week through the fall and make up a near endless variety of sweet warming treats for your table.



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