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Spice Up That Sweet Tooth

by Micah Elconin

More than just a time to eat large birds, the holiday season seems to be the time of year to eat lots of desserts. Its that one time of the year where Mom makes your favorite pie, and grandma makes some slightly less desirable creation. However it works in your home, it is always nice to throw in a nice twist every once in awhile. Many classic desserts become innovative, yet still familiar with the addition of the right herbs or spices. This two part article will be an introduction to some of my favorites.

Many of us (chefs included) often forget that herbs and spices can be utilized in sweets and desserts. As with their use in savory applications, herbs and spices promote unexpectedly wonderful flavors as well as good health. In fact one of the new trends in modern cuisine is the use of traditionally savory herbs and spices in sweets. Have you ever had basil ice cream? Honestly, its great, and not too far fetched either considering that basil is a very close relative of mint. Lets take a look at some more common herbs and spices and their uses in desserts all over the world.

Mint is one of the only herbs that we are used to seeing on the dessert plate. Mint leaves are used so often as a dessert garnish that one might even consider calling the act cliché. As already mentioned many people love the combination of mint and cream or mint and chocolate. It is also commonly macerated with fruit in sweet liquors. Mint slightly anesthetizes mucous membranes in the mouth and the gastrointestinal tract, which is why it creates a cooling sensation on the palate. Interestingly enough, mint increases stomach acidity, thus improving digestion, which is always a bonus when one indulges in rich desserts.

Cinnamon is used in desserts around the world. The powder that most people use is actually ground up shavings from a certain type of tree. Can you imagine the wonderful smell in that forest? There are two main types of cinnamon grown and sold. The most commonly found cinnamon is actually the bark of a Cassia tree (left photo). This variety is much stronger in flavor, denser, and darker in color than true cinnamon. The denser bark is next to impossible to grind with a spice grinder. Ceylon Cinnamon (also known as true cinnamon) is much lighter in texture and color, and has a subtler flavor (right photo). Cinnamon is very therapeutic. It increases circulation

and warms the body. However its most interesting attribute is its ability to increase the bodies ability to metabolize sugars, by increasing insulin sensitivity. So it doesn't just taste good in sweets, but helps the body deal with them as well. Several clinical studies have shown that large amounts of cinnamon in ones diet can help prevent and control diabetes. Cinnamon can be added to just about any dessert with outstanding results. Brownies, cobblers, pies, muffins, and many cakes all do well with the addition of cinnamon.

Cayenne is a type of chili pepper that is most commonly found in a dried powdered form. Like many peppers it creates the sensation of heat on the palate, which we term "spicy". I know, who wants a spicy dessert? Unlike cinnamon, cayenne needs to be used a bit more judiciously in the dessert kitchen, but there are definitely a few applications that are worth mentioning. One of my absolute favorite things is the combination of cayenne with chocolate. This is a traditional Latin American preparation that I often use when making truffles for clients. Trust me, it's a necessary life experience. Cayenne is also extremely therapeutic. Believe it or not, it is cooling to the body (hard to believe, I know, but try it out for yourself and see). Along with being a powerful antioxidant, it also exhibits anti-inflammatory properties, which can be useful for arthritis and other joint conditions, especially when used topically. Cayenne also lowers cholesterol and reduces the likely hood of heart disease.

Simple Mexican Chocolate Truffles

1/3 cup heavy cream

6 tbsp butter

2 cup dark chocolate chips

1/8 tsp cayenne

1/2 tsp cinnamon

1 cup almonds, roasted and chopped, set aside in a bowl

Heat cream and butter to a boil in a heavy sauce pan, then immediately reduce to a very low simmer. Whisk in the chocolate until well incorporated followed by the spices. Pour the mixture into a glass bowl and refrigerate for at least 2 hours. Remove from the fridge and scoop out approx. 2 tsp of chocolate and roll it into a ball. Then roll the ball in the almonds. Repeat with remaining chocolate. Refrigerate truffles until ready to serve.



The Sweet Starches

by Jennifer Walsh

Thanksgiving is almost upon us, and it seems every year we are inundated with the same questions, "What is the difference between yams and sweet potatoes? My recipe calls for sweet potatoes, but the picture in the magazine shows them as orange colored. Which ones do I want?"

Here at Mesa Produce, we pride ourselves on the fact that we can answer this holiday dinner problem. The short answer is that yams are orange inside with a sweet, moist, and creamy taste and texture, while sweet potatoes are yellow inside with a sweet, dry, flakey taste and texture. Yams can be mashed, baked, sautéed, and used for creamy soups and pies. Sweet potatoes can be baked, steamed, sautéed, fried, and hold their shape in soup just like regular potatoes. Two other more obscure varieties of sweet potatoes are the Okinawa purple and Japanese white flesh, both of which are similar to the Jersey sweets in texture.

Now, I bet you are wondering about the long story. Right? This explanation will answer the question about why a recipe calls for sweet potatoes, but it really wants yams. The sweet potato is native to the Western hemisphere and a member of the morning glory family. It is widely enjoyed in North America in breads and desserts and as a vegetable in its own right for hundreds of years. There are many varieties of the sweet potato, but three of most widely available are a yellow version and two bright-orange types. The orange, sweet ones are erroneously called yams. The true yam comes from Africa, the West Indies, and Central and South Americas. Yams were introduced to North America via the slave trade. It is a brownish tuber (a bulb of a tropical vine) with a coarse, almost "hairy" skin and off-white to yellow, pink, and even purple flesh; not at all like our sweet potato in appearance. Here in the States, true yams are commonly found in West Indian and Hispanic markets. So that old recipe handed down from grandma is correct when it calls for sweet potatoes; orange jewel, red garnet, or maybe even yellow jersey sweet potatoes.

My favorite way to prepare these traditional tubers for the big feast is to slice one of each variety into 1/4 inch rounds. I then spread them in alternating colors in a buttered casserole dish, and pour about a 1/4 cup maple syrup over the top, followed by a 1/4 cup of water. From there I cover the dish with foil and bake at 350° for 40 minutes. This way one can taste the difference between all of them without a complicated multi-dish project.

Still a little confused? Come on in with your recipe and we can tell you which variety is right for your sweet side dish or dessert!

Now let's talk about winter squash. Squash was first introduced to the colonists by our native Indians when they arrived in America. In fact there is evidence that squash was eaten in South America more than two thousand years ago. The English name for squash comes from the Narragansett Indian word "askutasquash", which means green-raw-unripe, which was the way the Narragansett's ate it.

Squash is the fruit of various members of the gourd family and is usually divided into two groups, winter and summer. "What's the difference?" you ask. Well, summer squash is picked young when the skin is tender while winter squash is picked fully mature with a protective skin that is thick and hard.

Winter squash is harvested in mid to late summer here in California. The protective hard outer skin will keep the squash ready for the dinner table for many months. With this in mind you can buy one for decoration during October and then turn it into a delicious Christmas pie in December.

Clay Denny, one of our knowledgeable team members at Mesa Produce, recently took home an assortment of winter squash for a proper taste testing. Along with a few large meals worth of baked squash, he has also, graciously, come up with some useful comments about his favorites.

There are many different types of winter squash (I think Jen can name 25), but I have decided to discuss what are in my opinion, seven of the most magnificent winter squashes.

Turban - a short bulbous squash with pumpkin like qualities, orange, green and white skin, yellow flesh, "greener" tasting, less sweet variety



Buttercup - my personal favorite, round base with a lumpy top, similar to the turban but not as knobby, dark green skin, dark orange flesh with a very sweet yam (orange sweet potato) like quality

Kabocha - looks like a short green pumpkin or a buttercup squash with his hat off, orange to yellow flesh that is very sweet and starchy

Butternut - close second favorite, distinguished bell shape is hard to miss, most popular squash on the market, beige skin with sweet golden flesh,

Spaghetti Squash - long oval like shape with a yellow complexion, look for skin that is dark yellow (ripe), not pale or white, golden yellow stringy flesh, with little sweetness and some nutty qualities

Delicata - colorful green and yellow ribbed skin with an elongated shape, yellow flesh with a creamy quality

Acorn squash - ribbed dark green skin and tear drop shaped, golden yellow sweet fibrous flesh, close second to butternut in popularity, but for some reason Micah's not a big fan

When purchasing, look for winter squash that are firm, well shaped, and heavy for their size. Also check to make sure there are no soft spots or punctures in the skin. However slight variations in skin color do not necessarily affect flavor (except for the spaghetti squash as already mentioned). Most squash are a good source of vitamins A & C as well as phosphorus, potassium & niacin.

If you have never been to Mesa Produce, you are missing out on a true Santa Barbara treasure. Mesa Produce is located at 2036 Cliff Dr on the corner of Cliff and Camino Calma.