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My Favorite Edible Flower

There aren't many things that are better than well prepared fresh young artichoke. And yes, there are more ways to prepare them than simply steaming and dipping the leaves in mayonnaise (although this can be quite tasty). Artichokes grow very well in California. They are actually the immature flowers of a cultivated thistle. Italians are the true masters of artichoke cultivation. In fact it was Italian immigrants who introduced this wonderful food to the Americas about one hundred years ago. Lucky for us, artichokes grow very well in California. Artichokes produce two crops each year. The first is in the spring (right now!) and once again in the fall when the weather cools off again.

Artichokes are extremely nutritious. Like their cousin milk thistle, they are strong liver tonics. They help protect the liver from all the toxins that it processes on a daily basis as well as promoting the flow of bile. Instead of spending the big bucks on supplements, try making tea out of leftover artichoke leaves. This even works with leaves that have already been cooked once. The resulting tea is very nourishing.

Artichokes are a source of cynarin, a compound known to lower blood cholesterol levels. Cynarin is so effective that

pharmaceutical companies are now duplicating it synthetically and marketing the isolated chemical. Grilled artichoke or little white pill ... consumers will choose what they prefer.

Many people are discouraged from buying artichokes because of the high prices in stores. However at the local farmers market organic artichokes can be found for about half the price. Better yet, local farmers grow different varieties than the traditional globe artichoke and some harvest them when they are still quite immature. This means there will be no choke (the fuzzy part) and much more of the leaves are edible. It's really a win/win situation.

Artichokes can be round, cone shaped, green or purple. All of these are good choices, depending on how you want to present them. There are a few things to look for when buying an artichoke. The top leaves should still be very tight. If the leaves are opening up more than a little bit this means that the artichoke is close to flowering and will have a bitter and "chokey" flavor. However, the flower that artichokes create is actually very stunning (see photo), and some farmers will sell mature flowers like other decorative flowers. These can be a great addition to any table. Also, the larger the inner white circle on the bottom of the stem, the more heart there will be (and who doesn't want that?). For the most part, large globe artichokes are best for steaming whole. When trimming artichokes to sauté or add to other dishes, the smaller varieties are more cost effective, because their heart to leaf ratio is much higher.

Like apples, artichokes begin to discolor very quickly once they have been cut into. This is easy to avoid though. After trimming artichokes either soak them in lemon water or rub them with oil. This will stop the reactions that cause discoloration. The stems of most artichokes are edible, and very similar in flavor and texture to the hearts. The skin of the stem is quite bitter however, so it is important to peel it before using.

Chef Micah has been playing with artichokes quite a bit lately, and has come up with some delicious dishes that put artichoke in the spot light. If Artichoke and Leek Soup, Artichoke Enchiladas Verde or Ginger Coriander Artichokes with Caramelized Fennel and Indian Hollandaise sound good it may be time to contact the Educated Vegetable to schedule a spring dinner party.



More Than Yellow

Turmeric is a truly amazing spice. It is medicinal, flavorful, colorful, and can create a stain that takes some effort to get out. What a powerhouse! More than once my love affair with this spice has left me with my shirt ruined, or hands so yellow people assume that I have a bad case of jaundice. And still, I continue to take it off the shelf and use it whenever I can.

Most turmeric used in kitchens is dried and powdered. This is much more convenient than using fresh root (if available), and seems to still have medicinal value along with strong flavor. As with any dried spice, it is best to use turmeric powder that is no more than six months old. The difference between fresh and



old spices is pretty dramatic. Go buy some fresh turmeric powder (preferably from the bulk herb section of your natural foods grocer) and compare the flavor with the old stuff that has been on the shelf since the beginning of time. You'll notice a difference.

As with most traditional spices turmeric is very beneficial to the health of the digestive system. It has been shown to reduce flatulence as well as intestinal cramping. Turmeric also seems to be increase the mucin content of the stomach thus protecting the stomach from ulcers. It increases bile output by over 100%. Bile has two main purposes in the digestive process. It emulsifies fats so they can be utilized more efficiently and it helps alkalize food as it flows into the small intestine.

Turmeric contains a compound called curcumin. This is the main compound responsible for many of its health benefits. However, whole turmeric extracts have been shown to be much more effective than curcumin alone in therapeutic applications. This is undoubtedly due to the complex interactions that occur between the many chemicals that make up this wonderful herb. Once again the whole food is safer and more effective.

Turmeric has been shown to be a very strong anti-inflammatory. Ayurvedic doctors have known this for a long time and have utilized turmeric to treat a wide variety of inflammatory disorders with great success. In India, turmeric is kept on hand in the same way that most Americans keep aspirin on hand. Including turmeric in ones diet can help relieve the pains of arthritis, headaches and skin eruptions. Moreover, when consumed in its whole form turmeric shows results without any negative side effects. At times inflammation is necessary for short durations in the body, but it is becoming more and more clear that long term inflammation in the body is the prelude to many other serious disorders such as cancer and diabetes. Liberal use of turmeric as well as other inflammation controlling herbs and spices is a great insurance policy that tastes good too.

Turmeric has been shown to protect the body from cancer at all stages of the development of the disease. It not only prevents the formation of cancer cells, but can also promote their degeneration. Part of the reason that turmeric is able to prevent cancer is because it is able to suppress the mutagenic properties of many common carcinogens (cigarette smoke, charred foods, and environmental pollutants). Turmeric is also known to be a

potent antioxidant. This protects the body from cancer formation as well as supporting DNA integrity.

If turmeric's medicinal value isn't enough to keep it well stocked in your kitchen, this next secret will hopefully be convincing. While I was in India a few years ago, Suddha, my wonderful landlord, taught me a very neat trick. Turns out turmeric is very good for helping blood to clot. This being the case, when one cuts themselves in the kitchen the first thing they should do is rub turmeric into the wound. The bleeding will slow down considerably and many times stop within minutes. Turmeric is antimicrobial so don't worry about it infecting the wound. The only draw back to this method is the yellow stain that is left for a day or so. I have used this many times as a quick fix in the kitchen, and no, it doesn't sting.

We talked about flowers already on the front page, but speaking of beautiful flowers, the one pictured is the flower that a turmeric plant produces. This is very similar to ginger which is a close relative.

Many dishes do well from the addition of turmeric. It is one of the main components in most Indian curry powders. These powders are nice for those that are not as seasoned (excuse the pun) in Asian spice applications. Try adding 1 tsp to 1 tbsp of curry powder to sautéed vegetables or mashed potatoes. Turmeric on its own does well with acidity. This seems to mellow out the pungent qualities that may turn some people off to it. It is also a classic addition to rice, like this simple Indian Yellow Rice dish:



Serves 3-4

- 1 cup basmati rice (white to be traditional, brown to be new age)
- 2 tbsp ghee (see February newsletter for recipe)
- 1 tsp whole cumin seeds
- 1/2 tsp whole celery seeds
- 6 whole cloves
- 1 inch piece of cinnamon stick
- 1 3/4 cup water (2 cups for brown)
- 1 tsp salt
- 1/4 tsp ground pepper
- 1/2 tsp turmeric
- 3 tbsp fresh cilantro, chopped

1. Rinse rice to remove any sediment or stray pebbles.
2. Heat the ghee in a heavy nonstick sauce pan until it is hot but not smoking. Add the cumin, celery seed, cloves, and cinnamon stick. Fry until cumin turns brown (~20 seconds).
3. Stir in rice for about 2 minutes. Add the rest of the ingredients except the cilantro. Bring the water to a boil.
4. Immediately reduce the heat to as low as possible and let cook for 20-25 minutes (45-50 minutes for brown). Turn off the heat and let the rice sit covered for about 5 - 10 minutes. Remove the cloves and cinnamon stick.
5. Fluff rice and serve.