

By PAULINE D. LOH
paulined@chinadaily.com.cn

Pumpkins are a neglected vegetable, yet they are very tasty and adapt well to all sorts of cooking methods. They can be baked, boiled or braised, steamed, stir-fried or simply pureed as a soup.

In our house, pumpkin (technically a fruit) is also used as a flavoring for cakes and steamed breads known as *mantou*.

For years now, we have harvested our own pumpkins.

In spring, my *ayi* or domestic helper would sow the carefully kept seeds from the previous harvest. The germination rate is good and pumpkins are easy to grow, even in arid Beijing. By summer, the vines would be sprawled out in the backyard and golden, trumpet-like flowers would appear.

The female flowers would have miniature fruits at their bases, and huge bumblebees would drone drowsily around them.

Hidden among the luxuriant foliage, fruits would develop, and when the leaves start to fall, they would surface as huge, round globes or heavy melons with a long neck.

Ayi would proudly harvest the pumpkins, stacking them high on the open balcony beside the back door, counting them carefully to make sure none were missing.

We have both traditional pumpkins, which can grow to about 10 kilograms, and the more fleshy, elsewhere negated butternuts. Which tastes better? We cannot decide.

If we allow the round pumpkins to cure a little, the deep orange flesh becomes very sweet. In northern areas like Henan province, they are simply cut up and steamed for an easy staple to replace rice. *Ayi* likes to steam, mash and then use them in pancakes and *mantou*.

For pancakes, the pumpkins are grated into an egg-and-flour batter then lightly pan-fried.



More than just Halloween lanterns

Often neglected as food, pumpkins are tasty, nutritious and bring a variety of health benefits

The *mantou* takes a lot more work but is delicious. Pumpkin pieces are steamed until soft, then pureed and cooled. This is then added to flour and then left to rise overnight naturally. In the morning, the lightly colored dough is formed into buns and slowly steamed over a gentle fire.

The result is an extremely flavorful soft, tender and plump bread that goes well with almost anything on the dining table. My husband likes his with lamb or beef stew.

The butternut squashes are not as sweet, but the texture is a lot creamier. We slice them up for a stir-fry with pork fillets or do a vegetarian version with beans and carrots. Their yellow color looks like sunshine on a plate.

Butternut is also nice baked in wedges until the edges are caramelized. I always think they seem almost meat-like. Grated, they can be baked into cakes and muffins like carrots. We also grate them into omelets.

This autumn vegetable can be stored until winter, and they make great warming soups and stews.

A Cantonese classic is pumpkin chunks and pork belly stewed in a fermented red bean curd. By the time the pork belly chunks are tender, the pumpkin pieces will have mellowed at the

edges and fully absorbed the salty bean curd seasoning.

In the north, they cook pumpkin with sweet potato noodles, a broader version of the glass noodles. Meat like chicken or beef only acts as flavoring, and the main attraction is the pumpkin and noodles.

Pumpkin is very nutritious and very good for all, from the very young to the elderly.

It advertises its goodness with its bright orange flesh, an indication of the rich vitamin A. It also has a significant amount of vitamin C and enough B6 for your daily average requirements.

Medical science has proved that eating pumpkin regularly has various health benefits. The beta carotene manifested in its orange color is a powerful antioxidant once converted into vitamin A.

Food rich in beta carotene may reduce the risk of developing certain types of cancer. It also helps in patients suffering from asthma and cardiac conditions.

Diabetic patients are also encouraged to eat more pumpkin, because of its high fiber and low glycemic index.

As a source of fiber, it can help regulate hypertension and improve heart health.

The potassium in pumpkin will help reduce risk of stroke, loss of muscle mass in the elderly and preservation of bone density.

With such a litany of benefits, we should be eating a lot more pumpkin. Add the orange vegetable to your diet and perhaps we'll all start looking at our Halloween lanterns differently.



A bowl of pumpkin soup is the ideal comfort food in the chilly autumn.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Recipes

Pumpkin pancakes

- 500 g grated pumpkin
- 100 g chopped ham or bacon
- 1/2 red bell pepper, diced
- 1 cup flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 3 eggs, beaten
- Salt and pepper

Sift the flour and baking powder into the beaten eggs. Stir in grated pumpkin, pepper and bacon or ham bits.

Mix well together and rest for 10 minutes. Drop a ladleful into hot oil and fry till golden on both sides. You can also add the batter into oiled muffin pans and bake in a preheated 180 C oven for 15 minutes.

Season to taste on the plate, although the bacon and ham bits should be savory enough.

This is the only way I can get our old lady at home to eat pumpkin, because the pancakes are light and tasty and do not taste of pumpkin.

Pumpkin soup

- 1 kg pumpkin
- 1 large brown onion
- 2 liters chicken stock
- 1 stick cinnamon
- Salt, pepper
- Water

Skin the pumpkin and cut into small chunks. Steam until soft.

Dice the onion. Heat up one large spoonful of butter in a pan and fry the onions till they turn transparent. Add the pumpkin and stir-fry for a few minutes so it blends with the onions.

Place the chicken stock in a pot and add the pumpkin and onions and cinnamon. Heat up till it boils.

Continue simmering until the pumpkin breaks down slightly. Season to taste.

If you like a creamy consistency, take the pot off heat and blend with a stick blender. Return to the fire and simmer for a few minutes.

Serve with a garnish of chopped coriander.

Steamed pumpkin

Cut up a pumpkin into wedges and steam over high heat for 20 minutes. Test with a chopstick. If it goes through the flesh easily, the pumpkin is ready. We usually steam some sweet corn, little yams and sweet potatoes in the same pot.