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Time to Gorge on Gourds

By Katy Budge

(About winter squash ... cooking with squash and some suggested wine pairings ... more squash trivia than you probably want to know... the photo is from Dos Pasos Ranch in Cambria.)

When the calendar turns to October, many people start sharpening their jack-o-lantern knives, but if that's the only reason you look forward to the winter squash harvest, you're missing a treat and the trick's on you!

A staple of human cuisine since pre-Columbian times, squash teamed with beans and corn to become the "Three Sisters" of indigenous agriculture from the Mayan to the Iroquois. The three crops were typically planted together so that the corn could provide support for the beans and shade for the squash, the squash could cover the ground and suppress weeds, and the beans could help improve the soil with nitrogen fixing. If that's not synergy, I don't know what is.

The squash family includes everything from pumpkins to zucchini, butternut to hubbard, acorn squash to spaghetti squash. Even loofas – yes, as in sponges – are part of the clan, along with a variety of predominantly ornamental gourds. Indeed, few foods serve such a wide range of purposes.

The terms "summer squash" and "winter squash" are obviously derived from their ripening and harvest times, but there are many other differences as well. While most summer squash are thin-skinned and can be eaten raw, you really have to hack through the rinds of most winter squash and cook it to make it palatable. However, that thick skin also allows the squash to last for anywhere from one to six months, depending on the variety, a feature that made them very popular when food storage was more of a challenge and winter months meant a dearth of vegetables.

Though we're probably all familiar with some basic winter squashes, there are literally hundreds of varieties, especially when you start delving into the heirlooms. (Beth Kendall of Dos Pasos Ranch in Cambria estimated that she grew almost 100 types this year, and Nature's Touch Harvest in Templeton has a big selection from nearby Chesebrough Farm.) However, despite their myriad sizes, shapes, and colors, winter squash almost always contain orange flesh with a slightly sweet, nutty taste.

After you've managed to cut it open (and some varieties and sizes can put up quite a battle, so be patient and careful with the knife), cooking winter squash is easy. You can just put the cut sides down in an oiled baking pan and roast it, or cube the squash and either boil or steam it.

Once it is cooked, squash is a versatile ingredient that can be worked into recipes such as risotto, ravioli, soups, or even an awesome cheesecake using SLO Chai spices. Of course, there's always the ubiquitous pumpkin pie, but don't try using the scooped out guts from the kids' jack-o-lantern unless you prefer your pies on the stringy, watery side. Either use one of the smaller cooking pumpkins, or opt for the canned "pumpkin," which is actually usually made from butternut or even hubbard squash; obviously, you could use one of those as well.

As you might guess from the orange color, winter squash is one of those multihued, good-for-you foods. It's high in beta-carotene, which your body converts to Vitamin A, and it's also a good source for iron, potassium, niacin, and fiber. Dare we hope that chai pumpkin cheesecake and pumpkin pie can count as vegetable servings!

Making Squash Blossom:

Certainly squash is wonderful on its own, baked with flavorings such as maple syrup or even a brush of Dijon mustard. However, these winter vegetables also make stunning soups, such as the Curried Squash Soup from Margaret Smith's and Jan Nix's Zinfandel Cookbook, and as you might guess from the title – it's a great match with a food-friendly Zin like those from Vista Del Rey Vineyards.

Another way to enjoy the sweet, butty flavors of winter squash would be to slice it and make a rustic gratin à la Maegen Loring of The Park Restaurant. If you made the dish with spices such as sage and black pepper, it would be a great match with a hearty Pinot Noir from Ortman Family Vineyards. Conversely, if you took it another direction and used ginger or even allspice, it would be a good pairing with the dry Alsatian-style wines of Claiborne and Churchill.

Squash Facts:

Don't know your kabochas from your acorns? Cook's Thesaurus is a good place to get started on basic winter squash types: <http://www.foodsubs.com/Squash.html#>.

Should it be spelled O'Lantern? Rumor has it that the Jack-O-Lantern supposedly comes from an old Irish legend – something about a drunk named Jack, Satan, and a hollowed out turnip with an ember in it. Eventually, the Irish began hollowing out everything from turnips to rutabagas to beets, and placing a light in them on All Hallows' Eve to ward off evil spirits and keep Jack away. Supposedly, when Irish immigrants came to America in the 1800s, they realized pumpkins were easier to carve.

When is a squash considered obese? Pumpkins can range in size from one pound to award-winners that top the scales at 300-400 pounds!

Raw hubbard anyone? Native to North America, the English word "squash" is reportedly derived from a word from the Narragansett language, "askutasquash", which translates to "a green thing eaten raw."

Can you spell o-r-g-a-n-i-c? Historically, squash has been pollinated by the specialized, native North American squash bee (*Peponapis pruinosa*) but due to declining populations possibly brought on by pesticide use, today most commercial plantings are pollinated by honeybees, also at risk from pesticides.

Any botanists and/or crossword puzzlers out there? Pumpkins, squash and gourds are all members of the vine crops called "cucurbits," so named for their Latin classifications: family Cucurbitaceae, genus Cucurbita, and four species -- *C. maxima* (hubbards), *C. mixta* (cushaws), *C. moschata* (butternuts), and *C. pepo* (pumpkins, zucchini).

This just in from Environmental News Network ... "Halloween lovers hoping to create the perfect jack-o-lantern might want to shop carefully this year because of a pumpkin fungus that has put a dent in some crops. Two types of fungus or rot have affected crops from the Midwest to New England, causing pumpkins to develop mold in some spots and then begin decomposing."

