

ENTERTAINMENT

FOOD & DINING

Cooking with pumpkin as an ingredient: It's not just decorative

By *Rebecca Caro*

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Nutrient-rich pumpkin is a versatile food that works well in many dishes, such as this pumpkin goat cheese and roasted red pepper crostini. (*Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post*)

Autumn's hallmark, the pumpkin, has made its grand entrance, carved for Halloween or gracing tabletop displays. Though most of us are familiar with the decorative aspects of this winter squash, we miss the potential it has as an ingredient.

True, Thanksgiving wouldn't be the same without a pumpkin pie, and pumpkin is being used to scent everything from candles to hand soap. But pumpkin — [rich in vitamins A, K, E, and potassium](#) — is a nutritional powerhouse waiting to make its way onto the table in many other dishes from ravioli to waffles. Its versatility and mild flavor lend itself to recipes that call for a smooth texture, like pumpkin soup or ice cream, or a chunky one, like the Afghan dish known as kaddo bourani, a flavorful sweet/savory dish containing chunks of caramelized pumpkin, ground beef gravy, and garlicky yogurt sauce.

We tend to get hung up on the canned versus fresh debate, but the truth is, though certain recipes will lend themselves to one over the other, in most cases, a canned version is perfectly fine for time and even cost-saving purposes.

Look for products that are 100 percent pumpkin, such as Libby's brand, which uses a variety it developed called the [Dickinson pumpkin](#) that resembles a funky butternut squash. Under the guidelines laid out by the USDA, solid pack canned pumpkin can include winter squash from genus *curbita pepo* or *curbita maxima*, but some brands aren't such sticklers on purity and may throw in a Boston Marrow, Golden Delicious, or Butternut squash. In all cases go for the kind that is plain, without pumpkin spice added, unless a recipe calls for it.

As far as the fresh version goes, do not eat the jack-o'-lantern. While the [Connecticut Field pumpkin](#) — is edible, it is bred specifically for its decorative traits. This large carving variety tends to be watery, needing straining after baking. (A side note: The original jack-o'-lanterns, a tradition that originated in the British Isles, were carved from turnips or beets, lit with a lump of coal, and placed in a doorway to frighten off the wandering spirits of the night on [All Souls' Day](#). It was the colonists who adapted the tradition using the pumpkin.)

Flavor-wise, smaller, denser varieties, such as the kind known as sugar pumpkins or pie pumpkins, are a better bet. Simply halve the pumpkin, remove the seeds, and roast in an oven face-down on a baking sheet for about an hour, or until the flesh is easily pierced with a knife. The pumpkin can also be peeled, seeded and cut into chunks before roasting. Save and roast the seeds as a snack or topping: they're packed full of nutrients.

It's time for us to embrace the pumpkin, as our ancestors once did — seed remains dating back to 5,500 B.C. have been excavated in Mexico. These recipes for pumpkin crostini, pumpkin gnocchi, pumpkin chili and pumpkin crème brûlée are a great way to start.

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RECIPES

Pumpkin, Goat Cheese and Roasted Red Pepper Crostini

The ingredients on the top of this crostini are flexible, since they are layered. Add another favorite ingredient as desired, or fresh herbs. This recipe is best prepared just before serving, so the crostini doesn't get soggy. Makes about 2 dozen.

Ingredients

1 baguette, sliced, or premade crostini

Olive oil

Salt and pepper

2 cups roasted cubed pumpkin

12 -ounce log of goat cheese, at room temperature

1 cup (2 small jars, or 2 fresh) roasted red peppers or roasted piquillo peppers, chopped

1 cup pepitas (shelled unroasted pumpkin seeds) available at health-food stores

1 tablespoons chile oil

Directions

FOR THE CROSTINI

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Spread the baguette slices in an even layer on a baking sheet and brush with the olive oil. Sprinkle sparsely with salt and place in the oven for about 5 minutes, just until the bread is lightly toasted. Remove from the oven.

To roast the pumpkin, halve a small pie pumpkin, seed and peel it and chop into medium dice. Add olive oil, coarse salt and pepper and stir to coat. Place in a 350-degree oven and roast for about 45 minutes, until the pieces are easily pierced with a knife. Remove and let cool slightly.

Spread each crostini with some goat cheese. Top with a small amount of peppers, then the cubed pumpkin. Spread the pepitas on a baking sheet, place them in the oven to roast them at 350 degrees for about 10 minutes. Remove them to a bowl, add the chile oil, and mix to coat the seeds. Top each crostini with a few pumpkin seeds. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Pumpkin Gnocchi with Maple-Sage Brown Butter

This recipe would also work well with puréed butternut squash or sweet potato, and is great served with braised Brussels sprouts. Serves 8.

Ingredients

2 cups pumpkin purée (canned or roasted, then puréed) 1 teaspoon pumpkin pie spice

1 cup ricotta cheese

1 egg

1 teaspoon salt

4 cups flour

Stick of unsalted butter

24 fresh sage leaves

1 tablespoon maple syrup

1/4 teaspoon cinnamon

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon pepper

Directions

In a large bowl, combine the pumpkin purée, pie spice, ricotta, egg and salt and mix well using your hands or a fork until a consistent dough is formed. Add the flour a half cup at a time, working it in as you go until all the flour has been added and you have a soft, pliable dough that is not sticky nor hard. Sticky dough makes mushy gnocchi, and dough with too much flour makes tough gnocchi. Turn the dough out onto a work surface and divide into workable pieces. Roll the dough out into a long thin roll about 3/4 of an inch thick. Cut the dough into sections about an inch long.

Bring a stock pot of salted water to a boil. Mark the gnocchi by rolling them over the tines of a fork to form a pattern on the dumpling.

Drop the gnocchi one by one into the boiling water, and use a slotted spoon to remove several of them as they float to the top. Remove to a bowl and top with the maple-sage brown butter before serving.

MAPLE SAGE BROWN BUTTER

Melt butter in a large saucepan over medium-low heat, adding the sage leaves and to cook until the butter darkens. Off the heat, add in the maple syrup, cinnamon, salt and pepper and stir to combine.

Pumpkin Crème Brûlée

Serves 6

Ingredients

1 3/4 cups whipping cream

1 cup whole milk

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon vanilla

1/4 teaspoon allspice

1/4 teaspoon cinnamon

1/4 teaspoon nutmeg

5 eggs

1/4 cup pumpkin purée (canned, or made from roasting and puréeing)

1/2 cup sugar, plus six teaspoons for sugar crust

Directions

With the oven rack in the center, preheat the oven to 350 degrees. In a medium saucepan, combine the cream, milk and salt and bring to a simmer over medium heat. Remove from heat and add vanilla, allspice, cinnamon and nutmeg.

In a medium bowl, whisk the eggs, pumpkin, and ½ cup sugar until blended. Gently add the cream mixture into the egg mixture. Pour into ramekins, and set ramekins into a baking dish. Make a hot-water bath by pouring hot water into the baking dish, (taking care to not get any water into the ramekins) until the water comes about halfway up the sides of the ramekins.

Bake until the crème brûlées are set in the center, about 45 minutes. They will be jiggly but not liquid. Set on a rack and cool. Remove the water from the baking dish and refrigerate. Chill until cold, for 2 hours or overnight.

SUGAR CRUST

Remove the brûlées from the refrigerator and gently remove any moisture from the top with a paper towel. Put an spoonful of sugar in each ramekin and shake it from side to side to evenly distribute the layer of sugar. Tap out any excess sugar. The layer should be thin enough that you can almost see the custard beneath it.

Move the oven rack to the highest setting and put the oven on broil. Place the ramekins on a cookie sheet with an inverted pie plate underneath, getting them close to the broiler. Broil for 5-10 minutes, until the sugar has created a brown and bubbling crust. Remove from the oven and re-refrigerate if you prefer to serve them cold, or serve as is, which will be slightly warm.

You can also use a chef's torch to caramelize the top of the dessert.

Vegan Pumpkin Chili

Add your favorite chili toppings (though the chili won't be vegan with cheese or sour cream) and serve with jalapeño cornbread. Serves 8.

Ingredients

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 large onion, diced

3 cloves garlic, peeled and diced

1 jalapeño, seeded and diced

2 bell peppers, any combination, seeded and chopped

3 cups fresh pumpkin, peeled, seeded, and chopped

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon chili powder

½ teaspoon crushed red pepper

1 teaspoon cumin

1 16-ounce can kidney beans, drained and rinsed

1 16-ounce can white beans, drained and rinsed

1 16 -ounce can black beans, drained and rinsed

1 cup dried green lentils, rinsed and picked over

2 28-ounce cans crushed tomato

Desired chili toppings: Shredded cheese, sour cream, chopped scallions, chopped cilantro, lime

Directions

Heat the oil in an 8-quart stockpot over medium heat. Add the onion, garlic, jalapeño, peppers, pumpkin, salt and spices, and cook until the vegetables have softened, about 10 minutes. Reduce the heat to low and add the beans, lentils and tomatoes, and simmer, covered, for about 2 hours, stirring occasionally. Add water as needed if the chili becomes too thick. Tastes even better the next day.