NUTRITION

Pleasures of the Flesh: Squash

At your local farm stand, supermarket or health food store this fall and winter, you may find acorn, banana, buttercup, butternut, carnival, delicata, golden nugget, spaghetti or turban squash. No matter which of the many gorgeous shapes and colors you pick, you'll receive plenty of health promoting carotenoids.

Carotenoids include beta-carotene, which our bodies turn into vitamin A. Studies show that when blood levels of carotenoids increase, risk for many cancers decrease. In addition, carotenoids may help block age-related macular degeneration (AMD), a leading cause of blindness. Squash makes an excellent addition to a mostly plant-based diet. For cancer risk reduction, the American Institute for Cancer Research advises people to fill their plates with two-thirds (or more) plant foods and one-third (or less) animal foods.

Gourd Guidance

The sweetest varieties are buttercup, butternut, cushaw, hubbard and kabocha. Buttercup, hubbard and kabocha have fairly dry flesh, so they are best in soups, stews and gratins. Acorn and spaghetti squash are both moderately bland, so they're best served with savory sauces and seasoned with rosemary, thyme, oregano, cumin or coriander. Because of its small size, delicata makes ideal single servings. All varieties are great for puréeing, roasting and baking. Choose squash that are heavy for their size with blemish-free skin. Squash can be stored unrefrigerated in a cool, dark place for up to three months. To cut, grasp firmly and use a sharp knife to slice through to the center. Then, flip and cut the other side until the gourd falls open. Remove the seeds.

Spaghetti Squash in Marinara Sauce

1 spaghetti squash
2 tsp. olive oil
2 shallots, minced
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 can (28 oz.) crushed tomatoes
1 tsp. dried rosemary
1 tsp. dried thyme
2 Tbsp. tomato paste
¼ cup grated parmesan cheese
3 Tbsp. chopped fresh basil

With the tip of a knife, pierce squash in several places. Microwave on high 15 minutes. Let cool ten minutes. In saucepan, heat oil over medium-high heat. Add shallots and garlic and sauté 2 minutes. Add tomatoes, tomato paste, thyme and rosemary and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 10 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in basil. Carefully halve squash and scoop out seeds. Scrape inside of squash with fork to remove spaghetti-like strands. Divide "spaghetti" among plates and top each with marinara sauce and parmesan cheese.

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