Most of us take bell peppers for granted. Just like celery and onions (two other under-appreciated veggies), bell peppers are always in stock. They're often used as a flavoring agent. And they pretty much taste the same, whether you buy them in January or July—or so you may think.

Actually, native bell peppers are sweeter and juicier at this time of year than any other. Late summer and early fall are when production peaks, and jewel-hued bells are more likely to come from local sources. Plus, the red and yellow varieties, which can cost up to $5 per pound out of season, are also cheaper.

Another thing you may not know is that most of the peppers you buy are actually red varieties—even if they look green, yellow, orange or the more unusual white or brown. Green peppers are simply picked before they ripen to red. Ditto for many varieties of purple, chocolate and white peppers, which will turn scarlet after a week or so if left on the vine. Only certain types of yellow and orange peppers retain their original hue when fully ripe.

Red, yellow and orange peppers tend to be sweeter than other colors, though the tangier flavor of green peppers is a better fit in certain cuisines. Cajun cooks in particular favor green peppers: They're part of the "Holy Trinity," a mixture of diced celery, onions and peppers used as a flavor base for everything from red beans and rice to gumbo.

When selecting peppers, choose those that are wrinkle-free and feel heavy. "Firmer peppers are more likely to have matured on the plant," explains Tim Hartz, a vegetable crop specialist at the University of California, Davis. "Smooth skin and heft also mean thick pepper walls—important since that's the part you cook with." Store them in a plastic bag in the fridge (just be sure they're dry). And wash them well just before using—bell peppers are one of the most highly fertilized vegetables.

The following recipes showcase bell peppers in everything from a stuffed veggie recipe to a sweet and savory caramelized tart. But the pizza sauce of pureed red peppers is true proof of their versatility. After all, you can't make that with a stalk of celery!

**Nutritional Profile**

1 medium-sized red pepper contains:
- Calories: 31
- Fat: 0.36g
- Carbs: 7.2g
- Fiber: 2.4g
- Vit. C: 226mg
- Vit. A: 3,726 IU
- Lycopene: 367mcg

From the USDA Nutrient Database
RED PEPPER PIZZA

Makes 2 12-inch pizzas; serves 8

Red peppers puréed with garlic and onion make a light, tangy alternative to the typical tomato pizza sauce. The cornmeal crust goes wonderfully with the pepper sauce and will keep up to 48 hours in the refrigerator.

Crust
2 cups all-purpose flour
1 cup cornmeal
¼ tsp. salt
1 0.25-oz. pkg. yeast
1 Tbs. granulated sugar
1½ cups warm water (115°F)
¼ cup olive oil, plus extra for greasing pizza pans

Topping
5 red bell peppers
1 onion, quartered
3 cloves garlic, minced
½ tsp. salt
¼ tsp. ground black pepper
2 Tbs. dried oregano
1 lb. fresh part-skim mozzarella, thinly sliced
2 small zucchini, sliced
2 romas, sliced
2 Tbs. capers

1. To make Crust: Combine flour, cornmeal and salt in large bowl. Stir yeast and sugar into warm water in measuring cup; let stand 5 minutes, or until bubbly. Add yeast mixture to flour mixture, and stir to combine. Knead in ¼ cup oil, and continue kneading 7 minutes, or until dough is elastic and no longer sticky. Transfer dough to greased bowl, cover and let rise 45 minutes. Punch dough down, and let it rise 45 minutes more, or, if making ahead, cover and refrigerate up to 2 days.

2. To make Topping: Core and seed 3 peppers. Cut each pepper into quarters. Place in blender or food processor with onion, garlic, salt and pepper, and purée until smooth. Transfer to strainer set over bowl, and let drain 30 minutes. Discard juice.

3. Preheat oven to 500°F, and set rack on lowest level. Lightly grease 2 pizza pans or baking sheets with olive oil.

4. Core and seed remaining 2 peppers, and slice into thin rings. Press half of dough into 12-inch round on pan. Spread with half of drained pepper puree, and sprinkle with 1 Tbs. dried oregano. Lay half of mozzarella slices on dough, and add half of pepper rings, zucchini and sliced tomatoes. Sprinkle with 1 Tbs. capers. Repeat with remaining dough and topping.

5. Bake pizzas 10 minutes on lowest rack in oven, or until crust is crisp and brown and cheese is hot and bubbly.

PER SERVING: 424 CAL, 20G PROT; 17G TOTAL FAT (6.5G SAT, FAT); 49G CARB; 32MG CHOL; 700MG SOD; 5G FIBER; 4G SUGARS

FOOD PHOTOS BY RENÉE COMET FOOD STYLING BY LISA CHERKASKY
FOR ADDING SWEET, SMOKY FLAVOR TO EVERYTHING FROM SALADS TO STEWS, ROASTED BELL PEPPERS SIMPLY CAN'T BE BEAT. HERE'S HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN:

1. PLACE PEPPERS ON BAKING SHEET, BROIL 10 TO 15 MINUTES, TURNING 3 OR 4 TIMES, UNTIL SKINS ARE BLACK AND BLISTERED. OR, SPEAR CORES OF PEPPERS WITH FORK, HOLD OVER HIGH GAS FLAME, AND ROAST UNTIL BLACKENED ALL OVER.

2. TRANSFER ROASTED PEPPERS TO HEATPROOF BOWL, COVER WITH PLASTIC WRAP AND LET STAND 15 MINUTES, OR UNTIL COOL. THE STEAM RELEASED BY THE HOT PEPPERS MAKES THE SKINS COME OFF EASILY.

3. REMOVE SKINS AND CORES FROM PEPPERS USING FINGERS, PULL PEPPERS OPEN, AND LAY FLAT ON CUTTING BOARD. SCRAPE AWAY SEEDS WITH BACK OF KNIFE.

MUHAMMARAH
(Red Pepper and Walnut Spread)
Serves 4
30 minutes or fewer
Vegan

A popular dip throughout North Africa, muhammarah makes a great alternative to hummus. Serve with pita triangles or thin rounds of French bread.

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup walnuts
2 red bell peppers, roasted, peeled and seeded (see box, above)
2 Tbs. dry breadcrumbs
2 Tbs. olive oil
2 Tbs. raspberry vinegar
1 tsp. cumin
$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. cayenne pepper
$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. ground black pepper
$\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. salt or more to taste
$\frac{1}{4}$ cup chopped parsley, optional

1. Heat nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add walnuts, and cook 3 to 4 minutes, stirring often, or until browned and fragrant. Remove from pan, and cool.

2. Place all ingredients except parsley in bowl of food processor. Purée until smooth. Spoon into small bowl. Sprinkle with parsley, if desired.

PER SERVING: 100 CAL; 2G PROT; 8G TOTAL FAT (1G SAT. FAT); 5G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 88MG SOD; 2G FIBER; 0G SUGARS

ROASTED PEPPER, FONTINA
AND ARUGULA SALAD
Serves 6
30 minutes or fewer

Fontina is a classic Italian cheese with a mild, nutty flavor that's now made in the United States. If you can't find fontina, shaved Parmesan works well.

4 Tbs. olive oil
2 Tbs. red wine vinegar
1 clove garlic, minced
6 cups loosely packed arugula, trimmed
1 bulb fennel, trimmed, cored and thinly sliced, optional
3 red bell peppers, roasted, peeled, seeded (see box, above) and cut into $\frac{1}{4}$-inch strips
4 oz. fontina cheese, sliced and cut into strips
Freshly ground black pepper

1. Whisk together oil, vinegar and garlic in large bowl. Add arugula and fennel, if using, and toss to coat. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

2. Divide arugula mixture among 6 salad plates. Divide red pepper and cheese strips into 6 portions, and arrange on top of arugula. Grind black pepper over salads, if desired, and serve.

PER SERVING: 191 CAL; 6.5G PROT; 15G TOTAL FAT (5G SAT. FAT); 9G CARB; 22MG CHOL; 176MG SOD; 3G FIBER; 9G SUGARS

Sweet Pepper Tarte Tatin
Serves 8
Vegan

This tart was inspired by Italian peperonata, a melt-in-your-mouth combination of peppers and onions.

Crust
1$\frac{1}{4}$ cups all-purpose flour
$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt
5 Tbs. olive oil
4 to 5 Tbs. cold water

Topping
2 large red or yellow bell peppers, cut into 1$\frac{1}{4}$-inch strips
1 large red onion, cut into $\frac{1}{4}$-inch slices
2 Tbs. olive oil
3 Tbs. balsamic vinegar
1 Tbs. fresh thyme leaves
3 Tbs. brown sugar
3 Tbs. slivered almonds
3 Tbs. raisins

1. To make Crust: Combine flour and salt in bowl. Stir in oil, and stir just until soft dough forms. Wrap in plastic wrap, and refrigerate 30 minutes.

2. Preheat oven to 450F.

3. To make Topping: Place peppers and onion on baking sheet, and toss with oil, 1 Tbs. vinegar and thyme. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Roast 30 minutes, or until vegetables begin to brown and caramelize, shaking pan several times.

4. Reduce oven to 400F. Bring brown sugar and remaining vinegar to a boil in saucepan. Reduce heat, and cook 1 minute, or until thick. Pour mixture into bottom of 9-inch pie pan.

5. Arrange peppers and onions in pan. Sprinkle with almonds and raisins.

6. Roll out Crust dough to 10-inch round. Place on top of filling, tucking excess into sides of pan. Bake 25 to 30 minutes, or until crust is golden. Let rest 5 minutes, and invert onto platter. Cut into wedges, and serve warm.

PER SERVING: 250 CAL; 3.5G PROT; 14G TOTAL FAT (2G SAT. FAT); 29G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 150MG SOD; 2.5G FIBER; 9G SUGARS

SEPTEMBER 2005
MEDITERRANEAN STUFFED PEPPERS
Serves 4

Stuffed peppers are a show-stopping, tried-and-true dinner classic. In this version, pomegranate juice and dried figs give it a Mediterranean feel.

4 large yellow or red bell peppers
¾ cup pomegranate or cranberry juice
½ cup dried figs, stemmed and chopped

1 ½ cups cooked wild rice
1 cup diced yellow squash
½ cup nonfat feta cheese, crumbled
½ cup chopped walnuts

1. Preheat oven to 400°F.
2. Cut tops off peppers to use as lids. Scrape out seeds and ribs with knife.
3. Combine pomegranate juice and figs in large saucepan, and cook over medium heat 7 to 10 minutes, or until figs soften and juice reduces and becomes syrupy. Remove from heat, and stir in rice, squash, feta cheese and walnuts. Fill peppers with mixture, and set in 9x13-inch baking pan.

Place tops on peppers. Add ½ inch water to pan, and cover with foil.
4. Bake 30 to 40 minutes, or until peppers are tender with slightly wrinkled skins and filling is hot.

PER SERVING: 325 CAL; 14G PROT, 1G TOTAL FAT (1G SAT. FAT); 51G CARB, 2MG CHOL; 215MG SOD; 9G FIBER; 23G SUGARS

Chef Joyce Goldstein roasted her fair share of peppers for salads and Italian-inspired side dishes at Square One restaurant in San Francisco.

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