sweet on sweet potatoes

Save a spot on your Thanksgiving table for our elegant sweet potato parfaits—they're too delicious to miss out on

By Neil Zevnik

Let's face it, the sweet potato is not the most gorgeous veggie in the cornucopia. If Disney were sketching out a new fairy tale with anthropomorphized vegetables, the homely sweet potato would most likely be cast as the Ugly Stepsister, or even the Troll Under the Bridge.

But beneath that gnarly exterior lies a vegetal heart of pure platinum. In fact, the Center for Science in the Public Interest declared the sweet potato to be the No. 1 superfood for better health. So I would propose that the more appropriate casting would be the Prince Who Saves the Day!

And the sweet potato is certainly no Johnny-come-lately; it has been consumed since prehistoric times, with relics more than 10,000 years old turning up in caves in Peru. Native to Central and South America, it was borne back to Europe by Christopher Columbus after his first voyage to the New World. The Spanish spread it to the Philippines, and in the 16th century, the Portuguese brought it to Africa, India, and Southeast Asia; at the same time, it was being cultivated in the southernmost areas of what would become the United States.

Though there are more than 400 varieties, ranging in color from white to cream, yellow, orange, pink, and even deep purple, the most commonly seen versions are white and yellow-orange. And by the way—those "yams" you buy every year at Thanksgiving? They're actually sweet potatoes. True yams are starchy and not sweet, rarely available in American markets, and can grow up to 100 pounds each!

The Prince Who Saves the Day

Our unexpected veggie hero derives its strength from unique root storage proteins with significant antioxidant properties. It is also overwhelmingly supplied with vitamin A in the form of beta-carotene, plus a megadose of vitamin C, not to mention significant fiber. These powerful antioxidants allow the sweet potato to joust with free radicals, averting the disasters of atherosclerosis, diabetic heart disease, and colon cancer. And the anti-inflammatory effects of these antioxidants aid in combat against asthma and arthritis.

Recent studies indicate that this terrific tuber is also a stalwart defender of folks exposed to cigarette smoke. A common carcinogen in cigarette smoke that causes vitamin A deficiency is offset by a rich source of that vitamin, such as sweet potatoes, and may help to ward off emphysema. A strong protector indeed!

Welcoming Our Hero

No one can say the sweet potato is not versatile, though its uses in America tend to be limited. In Uganda, it is served dried with peanut sauce for breakfast, or combined with cassava flour and served with smoked fish.
It's fermented into a Japanese alcoholic beverage called *imo-jochu*; in South America, the juice of the red variety is combined with lime to make a dye for cloth; and in the American South, it is baked into a sweetened pie.

When buying, choose tubers that are firm and unblemished—no cracks, bruises, or soft spots. Avoid those in the refrigerated case, as refrigeration alters taste. They'll keep for up to 10 days if stored loose or in an open paper sack in a cool, dark, well-ventilated place—not the fridge.

While Thanksgiving will always require a classic sweet potato casserole, it's time to try some new ideas as well, and get sweet potatoes into your diet year-round.

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**Sweet Potato & Caramelized Onion Casserole**

Serves 8

This side dish makes for an intriguing and simple twist on a holiday classic. I served it every year for 16 years at Elizabeth Taylor's family's Thanksgiving.

5 lb. orange sweet potatoes, peeled and sliced into ¼-inch disks
1 large yellow onion, halved and sliced thin
4 Tbs. organic unsalted butter
2 Tbs. olive oil
2 Tbs. orange juice
1/4 cup organic blue agave nectar
2 Tbs. brown sugar
1/4 cup chopped pecans (optional)

1. Place sweet potatoes in large pot with cold water to cover; bring to a boil, and cook until soft but not falling apart, about 25 minutes. Drain, and mash vigorously.

2. Meanwhile, cook onion, butter, olive oil, orange juice, and agave nectar in large skillet over medium heat, stirring often, until onion is soft and slightly golden, about 20 minutes.

3. Fold onion and liquid into sweet potatoes. Transfer to a greased, deep 9 x 9-inch square baking dish, smooth, and sprinkle top with brown sugar and pecans. (It can be prepared to this point up to 2 days in advance. Bring back to room temperature before heating.)

4. Heat in 350°F oven for 35-45 minutes, or until thoroughly warmed through and lightly browned on top.

PER SERVING: 306 CAL; 3 G PROT; 9 G TOTAL FAT (4 G SAT FAT); 54 G CARB; 15 MG CHOL; 63 MG SOD; 6 G FIBER; 26 G SUGARS
Ana’s Sweet Potato Ginger Parfaits Serves 6

Pictured on page 50. I created these festive treats for my friend Ana, a private trainer with a sweet tooth. They provide a satisfying and healthful coda to an intimate Thanksgiving dinner.

2 large sweet potatoes, 1 lb. each
2 Tbs. organic brown sugar
1/2 cup unsweetened soymilk
1 Tbs. organic blue agave nectar
1/2 tsp. cinnamon
2 Tbs. minced crystallized ginger
8 oz. softened low-fat organic cream cheese
8 oz. vanilla nonfat organic yogurt
2 Tbs. organic honey
1/2 tsp. vanilla extract
2 Tbs. grated orange zest
1 Tbs. Cointreau liqueur (optional)
1/4 cup crushed ginger crisp cookies

1. Roast sweet potatoes in 375°F oven until soft, about 1 hour.

2. Scoop out sweet potato flesh while still warm; place in food processor, add brown sugar, and purée until sugar has melted, about 30 seconds. Add soymilk, agave nectar, and cinnamon, and purée until smooth and light, about 1 minute. Transfer to bowl, fold in ginger, let cool to room temperature.

3. Combine cream cheese, yogurt, honey, vanilla, orange zest, and Cointreau in medium mixing bowl; beat with electric mixer on high speed until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes.

4. Divide half sweet potato mixture among four 8-oz. parfait glasses, sprinkle 1/2 Tbs. ginger cookie crumbs over each. Divide half of cream cheese mixture among glasses, and sprinkle another layer of crumbs. Repeat, and top with sprinkle of crumbs. Cover and chill at least 2 hours.

PER SERVING: 306 CAL; 9 G PROT; 8 G TOTAL FAT (4 G SAT FAT); 52 G CARB; 22 MG CHOL; 213 MG SOD; 3 G FIBER; 29 G SUGARS

If you can find organic sweet potatoes, you can eat the skin too. Baked and slathered with a little butter and low-fat sour cream, they make terrific appetizers. Nonorganic sweet potatoes must be peeled, as they are likely to have been treated with dye or wax.