Flavor-Filled Fennel

This overlooked vegetable is very high in nutrients and full of antioxidants.

If there has ever been an overlooked vegetable, it would definitely be fennel. Some people have an aversion to its licorice-like scent, while others feel as if fennel is a bizarre and obscure vegetable that they have no interest in learning how to prepare. However, those who have discovered it know that ignoring fennel is a waste of a versatile vegetable's amazing flavor and healthful benefits.

Even those who already cook with fennel might find that they aren't taking advantage of its versatility. For example, many people use only the delicate, lacy parts of fennel as a flavor-enhancing garnish for soups or salads. Others stick to just using the green-white bulbs, while tossing the remaining pieces aside. There's no season like the approaching autumn to start enjoying all the parts of fennel.

Fennel belongs to the umbellifereae family and is therefore closely related to parsley, carrots, dill and coriander. Fennel is available from autumn until early spring and both its stems and bulbs have been found to contain many nutrients.

One cup of raw, sliced fennel offers a huge source of vitamin C, folie acid, fiber, and potassium. Fennel contains its own unique combination of phytonutrients—including the flavonoids rutin, quercitin, and various kaempferol glycosides—that give it strong antioxidant activity. The most fascinating phytonutrient compound in fennel, however, may be anethole—the primary component of its volatile oil. In animal studies, the anethole in fennel has repeatedly been shown to reduce inflammation and to help prevent the occurrence of cancer.

Historically, fennel has been taken to alleviate bad breath, indigestion, intestinal spasms, cramps, and gas. It is thought that Puritans chewed the seeds in order to tame hunger during fasts.

Fennel spice, which is made from the vegetable's seeds, can be found year round—it's one of five spices in Chinese five-spice powder. Fennel is also common in Mediterranean and Italian cuisine.

In order to gain the healthful benefits of fennel, be sure to purchase white or pale-green fennel that has clean, firm bulbs. The bulbs should not be split, bruised, or spotted, while the stalks that grow from the bulb should be relatively straight. Additionally, the vegetable's fronds should be green but not flowering because blooms indicate that the bulb is past maturity.

When consumed right away, fennel is at its best, but it can be kept in the refrigerator for up to four days. (Be sure to wash it before consuming.) Use the fennel bulb in hors d'oeuvres, salads, stir fries, and gratins and reserve its fronds for seasoning soups, stews and stocks. Once you discover that fennel is both crunchy and slightly sweet, you will want to incorporate it into many of your daily meals.

With such a versatile and healthy vegetable, there is absolutely no excuse not to include fennel in your meals this season. You can thinly shave the fennel bulb and toss it with a bit of olive oil, fresh lemon juice, and a small amount of parmesan cheese to make a delightful salad, or combine it with avocados and oranges. Another option is sauté sliced fennel with equal parts of onion and bell pepper in order to make a simple vegetarian side dish.

Fennel can greatly enhance seafood such as tuna, grilled sea bass or scallops. Another idea is to garnish your favorite vegetable soup with coarsely chopped fennel fronds. Fennel can also be cut vertically, leaving bulb, stalk, and leaves intact and then brushed with olive oil and grilled on the barbeque until lightly browned.
