wake up your palate with walnuts
Learn how to include these nutrient-packed nuggets—the only nut rich in omega-3 fats—in your diet in for health and delectable flavor

By Neil Zevnik

I must confess,
I had rarely thought much about the ubiquitous walnut, beyond observing it in the occasional trendy salad or enjoying it in a chunk of honey-dripping baklava. And yes, the occasional silverware box made of walnut wood has caught my eye in an antique store. Little did I know, the uses of the walnut have been innumerable and fascinating for millennia.

Even an incomplete sampling of its uses is impressive. The wood has been used for fine furniture, yokes for oxen, shoes, gun stocks, and airplane propellers. The whole shells were employed as razors in Louis XI’s French court; ground shells have been utilized as a filling for dental cavities, as a polish for metal, and as thermal insulation in rocket nose cones. The hulls produced hair dye and pen ink, and the ancient Egyptians used the oil in the embalming process of mummies. And of course the nut itself has appeared on gourmet menus through the ages, from ancient Persia to Pompeii to Spago.

And the medicinal applications were nothing short of encyclopedic. The nut, leaves, bark, wood, and roots were variously used to treat any and all skin ailments—sores, gangrene, dandruff, hives, open wounds, lice—as well as internal problems, such as diarrhea, inflamed tonsils, and morning sickness. In Chinese medicine, the walnut is said to warm and hold chi (life force) in the lungs and help kidneys to grasp the chi.

A Brain Booster—and Much More
I have always been fascinated by the mediaeval notion that the visual characteristics of a particular foodstuff are a clue to its medicinal properties. Hence the persimmon, shaped like a heart, was believed to be beneficial for that organ; and the walnut, whose wrinkled shell resembles a brain, was thought to affect mental capabilities. And indeed, current research has shown that notion to be remarkably accurate—the omega-3 fats in walnuts encourage brain-cell membranes to allow optimum absorption of necessary nutrients, thereby boosting brainpower.

But that is only the beginning of the enormous benefits to be derived from this least-exotic of nuts. The omega-3s have been shown to provide cardiovascular protection by reducing high cholesterol levels and arterial inflammation, as well as helping to prevent and control high blood pressure; and its anti-inflammatory properties assist in treating asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, and eczema. Just 1 ounce of walnuts—five or six halves—provides 2.57 g of omega-3 fats.

Other available nutrients in walnuts include ellagic acid, which supports the immune system and provides antioxidant activity against free
radicals, and L-arginine, which may mitigate the effects of hypertension. Research has also shown that walnuts help to reduce the risk of gallstones, provide bioavailable melatonin to encourage better sleep, and promote bone health by reducing bone loss.

So I think we can safely conclude that walnuts absolutely need to be a daily part of a healthful diet, and in point of fact, the much-vaulted Mediterranean diet traditionally includes generous helpings of this widely available nut.

Getting and Using Walnuts

If you’re buying walnuts still in the shell, choose ones that feel heavy and are not cracked, stained, or pierced. You’ll probably mostly be buying them already shelled, so here are a few pointers: if buying from bulk containers, make sure they smell fresh, not rancid; that the bins are covered; and that the store seems to have fast turnover. If buying bagged, check the date stamp, if available, and make sure the nuts don’t appear shriveled or rubbery.

Due to their high-fat content, shelled walnuts are best stored tightly sealed in the refrigerator or even the freezer where they can last up to six months.

Liquid Gold—Pour It On!

Walnut oil is an excellent way to derive the desired health benefits—drizzle a little on salad greens with a squeeze of lemon, or use it to moisten some sliced melon. Oh, and use it sparingly—it’s intense!

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sea scallop & shiitake skewers with walnut-mint pesto

Serves 4 ( pictured right and on p. 59)

Serve this simple but delicious grill item with organic brown rice and grilled zucchini for a perfect late summer/very early autumn dinner. You can prepare the pesto ahead of time and refrigerate.

Pesto
1 cup fresh mint leaves
1 cup fresh Italian parsley leaves
1/2 cup walnut pieces
1/2 cup safflower oil
1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice
1 tsp. walnut oil
1 tsp. lemon zest
1/4 tsp. ground coriander

Scallops and Mushrooms
1 1/4 lb. large fresh sea scallops
6 large shiitake mushrooms, stemmed and halved
2 Tbs. extra virgin olive oil

1. To make Pesto: combine all ingredients in food processor; blend just until coarsely puréed.

2. To make Scallops and Mushrooms: Soak 4 wooden skewers in water. Heat grill to medium-high. Toss sea scallops and shiitakes with oil to lightly coat. Divide among four skewers. Grill 2 to 3 minutes per side, until scallops are barely cooked through and slightly opaque.

3. Plate, and top with 1 Tbs of pesto. Serve remaining pesto on side.

PER SERVING: 302 CAL; 30 G PROT; 16 G TOTAL FAT (2 G SAT FAT); 10 G CARB; 56 MG CHOL; 279 MG SOD; 2 G FIBER; 1 G SUGARS

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