

# Vegetable of the Month

## EXOTIC VEGETABLES!



These three exotic vegetables: calabaza squash, chayote squash, and bitter melon are all becoming more mainstream. All three are being found more and more in local supermarkets; there may soon be no need to go to a specialty market to try something new.

### Calabaza Squash

Calabaza is a type of pumpkin-like squash that is round in shape and varies in size. It can be as large as a watermelon or as small as a cantaloupe. The color of calabaza can also vary and may include greens, tans, reds and oranges. Some squash are all one color while other calabaza are multi-colored and may include all of colors listed above. This squash is popular in the Caribbean as well as Central and South America. It is also commonly called a West Indian Pumpkin.

#### Word to the Wise

Whole calabaza may be difficult to slice. Slicing through the tough rind often calls for a heavy cleaver or a very sharp knife. If the squash resists slicing, remove the stem and place the knife or cleaver blade along the squash's length. Gently tap the blade with a hammer until the squash falls open. Scoop out the seeds, peel and prepare!

### **Selection**

Calabaza is often sold already chopped into chunks in many Latin markets. This is because of the difficulty many have in chopping the whole squash (see box below). Select pieces with a fresh, moist and unblemished flesh. Soft or wet spots means the squash is beginning to spoil. The color of the flesh should be a bright orange. Whole squash are more difficult to find, but if you find one, select one that still has the stem attached and is heavy for

its size. You should avoid purchasing a squash with bruises, cuts, or soft spots. Calabaza is available year round.



### **Storage**

Whole calabaza may be stored in a cool, dry space for up to 6 weeks. Cut calabaza should be wrapped tightly or placed in a covered container in the refrigerator for no more than one week.

### **Preparation**

Calabaza has a sweet flavor and its texture is firm. This is similar to the taste and texture of more familiar varieties of squash, such as butternut or acorn. Calabaza may be substituted in recipes calling for those more common types of squash.

Calabaza is most commonly baked, either cut in sections or in cubes. Its seeds may also be roasted in a similar way as pumpkin seeds. Simply place on a baking sheet coated in cooking spray until brown and crisp.

### **Chayote Squash**

Chayote is a gourd-like squash that is about the size and shape of a very large pear. The skin is pale green and smooth with slight ridges that run lengthwise. Many compare the color to a light green apple. The flesh is white and there is one soft seed in the middle. Chayote is grown in several states including California, Florida, and Louisiana, but it is native to Latin America. Historically, this squash was one of the primary foods of the Aztecs and Mayas. Chayote is also called mirliton and the French call it christophene.

### **Selection**

Select squash that are small, firm and unblemished; just as you would select a pear. Choose squash that is heavy for its size. Tender skin, skin that reacts to pressure, often means poor quality. Chayote is commonly found in supermarkets during peak season (December to March), but may be found in larger supermarkets and specialty markets throughout the year.



### **Storage**

Refrigerate whole chayote in a plastic bag for up to one month. Cut chayote may be refrigerated in a covered container or tightly wrapped for 3 to 5 days. It is best to use chopped chayote immediately, as it can gather flavors from other foods stored in the refrigerator.

### **Preparation**

Chayote has a bland-tasting flesh that may be used in several ways. It may be prepared in similar ways to other summer squash, such as zucchini, but may require peeling and a bit more seasoning. Chayote is most commonly used in side dishes, stews, and casseroles. It may also be sliced in half and baked. The soft seed is edible, but many choose to remove it.



### **Bitter Melon**

Bitter melon is actually a member of the squash family and resembles a cucumber with bumpy skin. When first picked, a bitter melon is yellow-green, but as it ripens, it turns to a yellow-orange color. The inside of the melon is filled with fibrous seeds. Bitter melon is used mostly in Asian and Indian cooking. Other names for bitter melon include: foo qua, balsam pear, or bitter gourd.

### **Selection**

Select firm, unblemished melons that are from 5 to 12 inches in length. Choose melons that are still green for a more bitter flavor and a yellow-orange melon for a milder taste. Bitter melons are available fresh from April to September in most Asian markets and can occasionally be found in larger supermarkets. Some markets are beginning to carry bitter melons year round. They may also be purchased canned or dried.

### **Storage**

Store melon loose in a paper or plastic bag in the refrigerator for 3 to 5 days. Slice the melon immediately before use.

### **Preparation**

Cut in half and discard the seeds and fibrous core. To reduce the bitterness, blanch in boiling water for 2 to 3 minutes. The skin is edible and the melon is not typically peeled. The seeds are also edible, unless very hard, and are included in some recipes. Bitter melon is commonly stuffed, curried or pickled. It can also be used in stir-fry's and soups and may be steamed. Garlic or chili peppers are often added to recipes with bitter melon to offset the bitter taste.



### **Make Exotic Vegetables Part of Your 5 A Day Plan**

- Add cooked chayote to your green salad for a different flavor.
- Add calabaza to your vegetable soup for color and texture.
- Add bitter melon to your next stir-fry.
- Cook chayote with carrots for a blend of flavors.
- Calabaza makes a great addition to winter stew.

# Recipes

## Stuffed Bitter Melon

Makes 4 servings

Each serving equals one 5 A Day serving

4 bitter melon about 3 inches long (if longer cut into 3 inch pieces)

1 cup onion finely chopped

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup green chile finely chopped

$\frac{1}{2}$  Tbsp ginger root finely chopped

2 cloves garlic finely chopped

1 Tbsp coriander chopped

3 tsp canola oil

2 tsp flour

$\frac{1}{2}$  tsp red chile powder

$\frac{1}{4}$  tsp salt

1 tsp powdered coriander

$\frac{1}{4}$  tsp powdered tumeric

$\frac{1}{2}$  tsp lemon juice

$\frac{1}{8}$  tsp cumin seed

Wash bitter melon thoroughly with water. If bitter melons are of longer variety, cut them into 3 inch pieces. Remove skin by scraping with a sharp knife. Keep the skin aside. Slit the bitter melons length wise. Remove the seeds. Discard the seeds if very hard, otherwise mix them with the skin scrapings. Blanch the bitter melon in boiling water. Heat a nonstick frying pan and add 2 teaspoon oil. When the oil becomes hot, add cummin seeds. When the seeds become dark, add onion, green chile, ginger and garlic. Cook for 2-3 minutes and add all the spices. Stir well and cook until the mixture turns light brown, about 5-7 minutes. Mix half the coriander leaves. Take the bitter melon skin in a sieve and wash thoroughly.

Fill the bitter melon with the above mixture. Heat and spray oil on a nonstick frying pan. Place all the bitter melons in the pan, cover with a lid and reduce the stove to low. Let them cook for -7 minutes. Change the side of bitter melons and again cover with the lid. Cook for 5-7 minutes. Sprinkle with coriander leaves.

Nutritional analysis per serving: Calories 31, Calories from Fat 24%, Fat 1g, Protein 1g, Carbohydrates 5g, Fiber 1g, Cholesterol 0mg, Sodium 329mg.

## **Chayote Salad**

Makes 3 servings

Each equals two 5 A Day servings

1 fresh chayote squash

3 cups fresh spinach

16 oz garbanzo beans, cooked

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup chopped red onion

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup chopped carrot

2 Tbsp fat free vinaigrette salad dressing

4 oz. reduced fat Monterey Jack cheese, shredded

Cook chayote in a small amount of boiling water for about 15 minutes, or till tender. Rinse pieces in cold water; peel, and remove seed. Cut into  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch chunks. In a large salad bowl, toss together spinach, chayote, garbanzo beans, and cheese. Top with nonfat vinaigrette

Nutritional analysis per serving: Calories 301, Calories from Fat 29%, Fat 10g, Protein 20g, Carbohydrates 36g, Fiber 9g, Cholesterol 27mg, Sodium 454mg.

## **Caribbean Calabaza and Chayote Ratatouille**

Makes 6 servings

Each serving equals two 5 A Day servings

- 1 cup calabaza squash, cubed
- 2 chayote squash, diced
- 2 Anaheim peppers, diced
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup red bell pepper, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, diced
- 1 medium green plantain, sliced
- 1 cup onion, chopped
- 2 Tbsp olive oil
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 cup orange juice
- 1 tsp cumin seed
- 1 tsp oregano, ground
- 1 tsp black pepper

Warm the olive oil in a large dutch oven. Add the onion and cook until translucent. Then add each of the vegetables at 2 minute intervals starting with the green plantains, calabaza, chayote, Anaheim chile and red pepper. Stir well without crushing any of the vegetables. Season with garlic, oregano, cumin, black pepper and salt. Moisten the mixture with the orange juice. Simmer for 5 minutes or until tender.

Nutritional analysis per serving: Calories 139, Calories from Fat 30%, Fat 5g, Protein 2g, Carbohydrates 24g, Fiber 3g, Cholesterol 0mg, Sodium 399mg.

## **Calabaza Soup**

Makes 6 servings

Each equals one 5 A Day serving

1½ lb Calabaza squash, diced

1 green bell pepper, chopped

1 garlic clove

4 scallions, minced

1 Tbsp dried thyme

1 tsp allspice

1 tsp cumin

1 tsp fenugreek

1 large ripe tomato, chopped

¼ cup coconut milk

¾ cup low-fat milk (1%)

Simmer all the ingredients except the milks in 5 cups of water for 1 hour. Strain the liquid into a bowl and allow the solids to cool. Puree the cooled solids.

Return the puree to the soup pot along with the strained liquid and add the milks. Simmer, uncovered, until the mixture is thickened to your desired consistency.

Nutritional analysis per serving: Calories 106, Calories from Fat 25%, Fat 3g, Protein 3g, Carbohydrates 18g, Fiber 4g, Cholesterol 2mg, Sodium 187mg.



## **Chayote and Poblano Slaw**

Makes 8 servings

Each equals one 5 A Day serving

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup pineapple juice

1 large cucumber, halved lengthwise

1 large chayote squash, peel, pitted and halved lengthwise

2 cups pineapple, diced

4 poblano peppers roasted and peeled

1 Tbsp Dijon mustard

1 Tbsp olive oil

In a small saucepan, simmer pineapple juice over low heat, until reduced to 2 tablespoons. Let cool to room temperature. Sauté chayote just until crisp, about 1 to 2 minutes. Thinly slice cucumber and the chile. Toss with pineapple. Whisk the remaining ingredients with the pineapple juice, and pour over vegetables, mix well. Serve immediately or refrigerate, covered up to 4 hours.

Nutritional analysis per serving: , Calories 76, Calories from Fat 30%, Fat 3g, Protein 2g, Carbohydrates 13g, Fiber 3g, Cholesterol 0mg, Sodium 51mg.