



Use your gourds

For tasty squash varieties, think beyond butternut

The height of autumn is also the height of winter

squash season. It's the time when outdoor fruit stands that previously were piled high with melons and stone fruits become dedicated to heaps of rock-hard orbs and saucers of all sizes, shapes and colors.

by
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Chances are you're most familiar with the butternut, and perhaps the acorn and the spaghetti types. But these winter squashes represent just the tip of the pile, and there are dozens more that many people know little to nothing about. Many of them trump even the acclaimed butternut squash with flesh that is starchier, sweeter and sappier.

But butternut squash produces bigger yields than many other types and lasts longer in storage, making it a good choice for farmers, according to Thaddeus Barsotti, squash savant and co-owner of Capay Organic, a northern California farm. Barsotti says this is a main reason the butternut has come to dominate the market, leaving other winter squashes—such as the delicata, the buttercup and the sweet dumpling—on the fringe.

In fact, all winter squashes, which fall into the genus *Cucurbita* and once were a key dietary staple in Mesoamerica, have mostly vanished from Americans' cultural pantry.

For a prospective shopper, the tough rind on many squashes can be an immediate deterrent to bringing one of the big, clunky things home. The relatively long cook time can also be a turnoff.

The irony is, few kitchen tasks could be easier than putting a squash into a hot oven. What's more, baked winter squash is awesome. While more ambitious chefs may blend butternut or kabocha squash into soup, simmer it in coconut milk curries, or puree and drizzle it like sauce over pasta, the simplest prep method is hard to beat.

"Baking them is just the best way," says Barsotti, whose favorite winter squash is the delicata. "You get the real taste of the squash. I like a good butternut squash soup, but what you're really tasting is the cream and the salt and that other stuff." Whatever kind of winter squash you're cooking, Barsotti suggests slicing it in two, scooping out the seeds, and baking the halves for about 40 minutes at 400 to 425 degrees. It doesn't hurt to oil and salt them first, but it's by no

means necessary.

With that in mind, the following are seven of the best winter squashes likely appearing at markets near you. Look closely—they're likely hiding just behind the butternut heap.

Kabocha: A tried and true champion among squash, it has green mottled skin and sweet flesh that, when cooked, is usually thick and a bit sticky, with a texture like chestnut and a faint essence of pumpkin.

Sunshine Kabocha (aka Japanese Orange Pumpkin): If you thought kabochas were good, then you'll love this close cousin cultivar. Saucer shaped like its counterpart but fiery orange on the outside, the sunshine kabocha has silky orange flesh that is softer than the green kabocha's.

Delicata: This beauty looks like some sort of heirloom cucumber, with its lengthy shape and the yellow lateral ribs that run its length. Baked whole, it can be served much like a baked potato. The flesh is yellowish with a sweet flavor lingering somewhere between that of zucchini and sweet potatoes.

Buttercup: The distinguishing mark of this frog-green squash is a peculiar bulge on its rump. Other than that, the buttercup can easily fool one into thinking they're buying a kabocha. It doesn't matter. As a close relative, it cooks up much the same, the thick walls of golden meat melting in the oven as sappy juice oozes over the baking pan.

Jarrohdale: The bluish-gray skin of this Australian-born cultivar is deceptive. For inside the dull colored rind is gleaming orange flesh that comes out of the oven exceptionally soft and creamy with a grainy tasting finish. The remarkable smoothness of the meat makes the Jarrohdale a suitable, and probably more flavorful, stand-in for mashed potatoes.

Red Kuri (aka Red Hokkaido): Brilliant red and festively shaped like a joker's hat. The meat is rich, syrupy and soft, with some of the fibrous texture and juicy consistency of a pumpkin.

Sweet Dumpling: The apple-size sweet dumpling is one of the smallest of the winter squashes. The meat is moist and tender, light in color, and with an exceptional flavor of creamed corn. Its size and shape make it an ideal vessel to stuff with savory goodies and plate as an individual portion. □



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