

The Holiday Nut

by Caroline Barringer, NTP, CHFS, FES

The holiday nut... No, I'm not referring to overzealous neighbors who decorate their homes with enough holiday lights and animated figures to rival that of a Disney parade, nor am I referring to the crazy uncle who gallops around at family gatherings with antlers on his head singing "Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer" loud enough for the entire town to hear. Rather, I am referring to the quintessential holiday nut - the delicious CHESTNUT!

HISTORY

Chestnuts date back to prehistoric times and were probably one of the first foods humans consumed. Chestnut trees from Greece were introduced into Europe, but Native American Indians feasted on an American variety of chestnuts before immigrants from Europe brought over their particular breed of chestnuts to America. Chestnut trees are cousins to oak trees and their timber very similar. Chestnut trees can live for 500 years and will bear "fruit" at the age of 40 years old usually during the months of September through November. Chestnuts grow inside spiked casings called burrs. To this day, chestnuts are a common staple in European diets, often used as a substitute for potatoes. Like hot pretzels sold at vendor stands on the streets of New York, chestnuts (called marrons) are sold on the streets of France as snacks. Modern domestic chestnut crops are currently located in California, Michigan, Ohio, and Washington.

I was introduced to chestnuts just a few years back when my dear friend Shauna baked a batch of them at my home around the holidays. I had never eaten real chestnuts before - at least not right out of the shell. I had only heard mention of them in that infamous "Christmas Song" we all know and love sung by both Nat King Cole and Karen Carpenter. To my surprise, chestnuts were softer in texture compared to most other nuts and they had a delightfully sweet aroma and flavor.

CHESTNUT NUTRITION

Being a Nutritional Therapy Practitioner (NTP) and a Certified Healing Foods Specialist (CHFS), I was curious about the nutritional aspects of chestnuts and I began researching their nutritive value along with methods of preparation. To my surprise, chestnuts aren't much like a nut at all. In fact, the chestnut is often called the "un-nut" due to its low fat content (around 1%) compared to a regular nut, which has 45-55% fat content. Chestnuts are higher in carbohydrates (78% starches) and have high moisture content, as well.

Below is a nutrition fact panel reflecting approximately a four ounce serving (about a half cup) of fresh, uncooked/unprocessed chestnuts. Just as cooked carrots have a higher sugar content compared to raw carrots, dried chestnuts have higher caloric, protein, fat, and carbohydrate content than fresh chestnuts.

<u>Nutrient</u>	<u>Serving size - 100g (about 4 ounces or 1/2 cup of fresh chestnuts)</u>
Calories	170
Calories from Fat	9
Fat	1.01g
Saturated	0.2g (18.8%)
Polyunsaturated	0.5g (52.3%)
Monounsaturated	0.3g (28.9%)
Carbohydrates	37.2g
Dietary Fiber	6.3g
Sugars	4.6g
Protein	3g
Water/Moisture	57.84%

Fresh chestnuts are moderately high in B vitamins, namely Vitamins B1 and B2, and minerals such as potassium, iron, phosphorus, sodium, and calcium. Even though chestnuts are low in fat overall, they are highest in percentage of polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA's), so they should be eaten in moderation and prepared with care.

CHESTNUT STORAGE

Chestnuts are more akin to cereal grains such as barley, millet, oats, rice, rye, and wheat. Unlike other nuts, chestnuts are perishable and must be refrigerated or they will dry out. Chestnuts will easily store for up to six months between 32 and 38 degrees. Most food markets store and display their chestnuts at room temperature. This encourages mold growth and drying will occur within just a few days. You might wish to print out this article for your local grocer to help her/him keep their stock of chestnuts fresher for a longer period of time by keeping them refrigerated.

CHESTNUT PRODUCTS

Chestnuts come in many different sizes. There are jumbo, large, and medium colossal size chestnuts. You can even purchase peeled, dried, or frozen chestnuts to use in recipes year-round. I also found a company making chestnut slices. This unique product is made of thin, dehydrated chestnut slices that do not require refrigeration. I love adding these to my soups and stews because they cook up quickly and also serve as a delicious, nutritious on the go snack.

My favorite chestnut product is stone-milled chestnut FLOUR. Old-fashioned, stone-milled chestnut flour from carefully dehydrated chestnuts serves as an excellent alternative to wheat flour because it is gluten free. This processing technique is non-invasive and does not destroy precious enzymes or damage the small amount of fatty acids within the chestnuts. Like flaxseed meal, chestnut flour can be used safely in cooking at lower temperatures. Polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA's) are unstable when extracted from foods, but are protected when they are part of foods in their whole state. You just don't want to burn PUFA containing foods as this will damage the naturally occurring PUFA molecules.

CHESTNUT PREPARATION

There are many way to prepare chestnuts - some methods healthier than others. As previously mentioned, PUFA's are easily damaged by heat. Chestnuts are relatively low in fat, but of the fatty acid content they do possess, PUFA's are most abundant, so roasting them traditionally at conservative temperatures is acceptable. Revolving between eating them roasted, raw, and/or dehydrated may be the best approach. Some nutrition experts feel it is not wise to eat raw chestnuts due to high tannic acid levels. Tannic acid may inhibit mineral absorption and possibly reduce the effectiveness of digestive enzymes, but tannic acid also has anti-oxidant and anti-mutagenic properties that are beneficial. Other health experts say eating raw chestnuts is perfectly safe, but the flavor is not as tasty as when roasted. Raw chestnuts are also difficult to peel.

If you do plan to roast chestnuts, you must perforate the outside shell first. This will allow steam pressure to escape as the nut heats up. Using a sharp knife (with caution) cut an X into the shell. Do this for each chestnut. While you are scoring each nut, preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Place scored chestnuts on a cookie sheet or in a shallow pan and bake for about 20 to 25 minutes. Once roasted the shell curls back and opens up to reveal the chestnut inside. You may wish to eat the chestnut with the pellicle on or peel it off. Either way, your roasted chestnut will taste sweet and delicious. Peeling the inner pellicle is easier when the chestnuts are still warm.

If you wish to boil chestnuts, score each nut and place in a pot of boiling water for approximately 30 minutes. Remove from water, peel each chestnut and enjoy!

To dehydrate chestnuts, you will need to peel them first, which is rather difficult unless they are warm. I suggest buying pre-dried/dehydrated chestnuts to make life a bit easier. They can be purchased online at www.chestnutsonline.com.

Sources: Chestnuts On Line.com
Chestnut Growers, Inc.com
Chestnut History - About.com
How to Roast and Eat FreshChestnuts - associatedcontent.com - by P. Flippone
Frequently Asked Questions -www.westonaprice.org
www.phytochemicals.info - TannicAcid