

# Food & Drink

## Squash is the most versatile vegetable

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Squash, which are members of the gourd family, are native to the Western Hemisphere. They take their name from a Narragansett Indian word meaning "something green."

There are many different colours, shapes and sizes of squash grown in North America, but for the cook the most important division is between sum-

mer (or soft-skinned) and winter (or hard-skinned) varieties.

Summer squash have thin, edible skins and soft seeds. The tender flesh has a high water content, a mild flavour and doesn't require a long cooking time. Soft-skinned summer squash are considered green in the sense that they are picked before they are fully mature.

The most widely available varieties of summer squash are crookneck, patty pan and zucchini. Summer squash is very

perishable and should be refrigerated in a plastic bag for no more than five days. It can be prepared using a variety of methods including steaming, baking, sauteing and deep-frying.

Winter squash have hard, thick skins and seeds. The deep yellow to orange flesh is firmer than that of the summer squash and therefore requires longer cooking. North America is home to a great range of winter squash including butternut, buttercup, acorn, pumpkin, turban and hubbard.

The bright yellow spaghetti squash has stringy flesh that separates into spaghetti-like strands when baked. It is a delicious vegetable which can be incorporated into a variety of pasta or rice dishes. Though most varieties are available year round, winter squash is best from early fall through the winter.

Choose winter squash which are heavy for their size and have a hard, deep-coloured rind, free of blemishes or moldy spots. The hard skin of a winter squash protects the flesh and allows it to be stored longer than summer squash. It does not require refrigeration and can be kept in a cool, dark place for a month or more, depending on the variety.

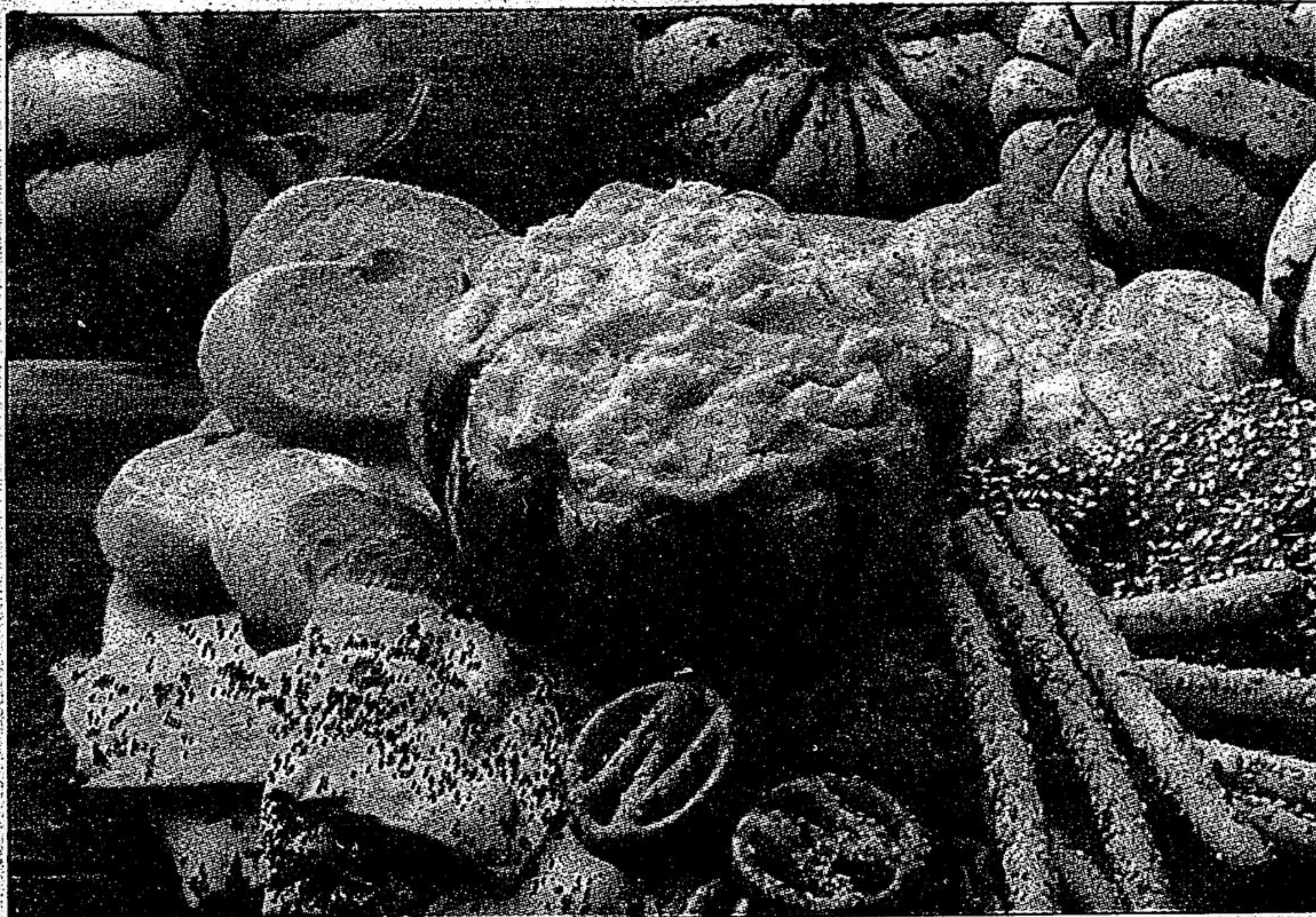
Once the seeds are removed, winter squash can be baked, steamed or simmered. Smaller squash may be halved to bake in their skins with a topping of butter and seasoning, often with brown sugar and spices.

Most winter squash also puree well, making a good foundation for soups as well as sweet pie fillings.

Squash is an extremely versatile veg-

etable — you would be hard-pressed to find another food which could be used successfully in sweet or savoury recipes, at breakfast, lunch or dinner and in any course of a meal.

The three recipes below demonstrate the versatility of the squash. You'll have to try one (or all) of them to experience its delicious flavour. Enjoy!



Squash is so versatile, it can even be used as an appetizer at a party. You can make Savory Squash and Onion Appetizer, which can be served as a dip or a spread (see below).

### Picking the perfect pumpkin



Food for Thought

Lisa Cartwright

When looking for a perfect pumpkin for a Jack-O'-Lantern, people should choose one that has a thick wall, is deep orange in colour and shiny and has a good stem, said the head produce buyer for The Garden Basket and Comella Fine Foods.

If the wall caves in easily when the pumpkin is gently pressed, then the vegetable has a thin wall, said Joseph Comella.

The shine shows the freshness of the pumpkin (when it is dull-looking, the pumpkin is dehydrated), while the deep orange colour shows quality.

With a pale-coloured pumpkin, "there is a high possibility that it will break down (faster)." Having a good stem allows the carver to get the top off easier. It is not, however, a means to pick up the pumpkin.

"Never pick it up by the stem. If the stem is dry, it can't handle the weight of the pumpkin and it will snap."

You should use both hands and pick the pumpkin up by the bottom.

A healthy pumpkin should last at least a month.

People should leave it uncarved in a cool place. A garage is ideal, but a covered porch (where frost can't get at it), is adequate as well, said Comella.

Comella suggested carving the pumpkin a maximum of two or three days before Halloween.

"The longer it's carved, the more it will dehydrate" and start to break down, he said.

Comella suggested people use a battery-powered lightbulb instead of a candle because it is safer.

NOTE: The Garden Basket has a 605 pound pumpkin and a 50 pound zucchini on display.

### RECIPES

#### ZUCCHINI CASSEROLE

6 medium zucchini, sliced raw and unpeeled  
3 tbsp (50 mL) melted butter, or margarine  
3 tbsp (50 mL) all-purpose flour  
3 large tomatoes, peeled and chopped

OR

1-19 oz (540 mL) can tomatoes, drained and chopped

1 green pepper, seeded and chopped

1 small onion, peeled and chopped

3 cloves garlic, crushed

1 tsp (5 mL) salt

1 tbsp (15 mL) brown sugar

1 bay leaf

1 tsp (5 mL) rosemary

1 tsp (5 mL) thyme

1 tsp (5 mL) oregano

1/2 tsp (2 mL) pepper, freshly ground

1/2 lb. (250 g) fresh mushrooms, sliced  
bread crumbs, butter, grated cheese (old or medium cheddar, Parmesan, mozzarella — whatever you prefer)

Preheat oven to 350° F (180 C). Place zucchini in a greased 9" X 13" (3.5 L) casserole. Add flour to butter and stir until blended. Add tomatoes, green pepper, onion and garlic to butter mixture plus seasonings. Stir to mix.

Add mushrooms, and cook for 5 minutes. Pour vegetables over zucchini. Cover top with breadcrumbs. Dot lightly with butter or margarine and/or grated cheese.

Bake uncovered for 45 minutes.

#### SQUASH AND PEAR SOUP

For a special meal, serve the soup in hollowed out squash bowls.

1 hubbard squash, peeled, seeded and chopped

1 onion, diced  
3 shallots, diced  
2 tbsp (30 mL) butter  
4 cups (1 litre) stock, vegetable or chicken  
1/2 cup (100 mL) white wine  
2 tbsp (30 mL) brandy  
1 cup (250 mL) whipping cream  
2-3 Anjou pears, peeled and diced  
salt, pepper, nutmeg

Melt butter in large skillet or soup pot. Sauté onion and shallots until transparent. Add squash and pears and sauté for a few more minutes.

Add the white wine and stock to the skillet and bring to a boil. Gently boil soup on medium heat (stirring occasionally) for 20 to 30 minutes. Remove from heat. Puree the soup in a processor until smooth.

Return soup to pot and bring back to a boil. Reduce heat and stir in whipping cream and brandy. Season to taste with salt, pepper and nutmeg. Garnish soup with pieces of pear.

#### PUMPKIN CHEESECAKE

A delicious recipe from Foodland Ontario  
Crust:

1/4 cup (50 mL) butter or margarine

1 1/4 cups (300 mL) gingersnaps, crushed

Filling: 2 8-oz pkgs (2-250 g) soft cream cheese

2/3 cup (150 mL) granulated sugar

2 eggs, large

1 2/3 cups (400 mL) pumpkin puree

1/2 tsp (2 mL) each cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger

1/2 tsp (2 mL) salt

garnish: whipped cream

Crust: Melt butter in saucepan. Stir in gingersnap crumbs. Press into ungreased 9" X 9" (22 X 22 cm) pan. Bake in 350° oven for 10 minutes.

Filling: Beat cream cheese and sugar together. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Mix in remaining ingredients.

Pour over crust. Bake in 350° oven for 50 to 60 minutes or until firm. Chill.

Garnish with whipped cream. Serves 12. This freezes well.

#### SQUASH & ONION APPETIZER

Use 2 to 4 sweet dumpling squash, 2 tbsp olive oil, 4 sliced onions, 2 tbsp of water, 1 tbsp of soy sauce, 1/3 cup of ranch-style salad dressing, 5 tsp balsamic vinegar, 2 tbsp of fresh parsley, plus salt and pepper.

Slice tops off squash and scoop out and discard seeds. Place tops and squash in water in baking pan, cover tightly with foil. Bake in 350 degree oven or until squash are tender.

In large frypan, heat oil and add chopped onions; cook until onions are translucent. Add water and soy sauce to pan; reduce heat and cook 10 minutes longer, stirring occasionally.

Scoop out cooked squash from shells and tops, leaving 1/4-inch-thick shell; set aside one shell.

Combine cooked squash in bowl and mash, add chopped onions, dressing, vinegar and parsley. Add salt and pepper to taste and chill.

Just before serving, pile squash mixture into reserved shell and serve with crackers, garlic toast or vegetables for dipping.