

## Foodie Freak: The long and fascinating history of lentils

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To me, winter is soup time; throughout the entire winter I almost always have a pot on the stove making some kind of soup.

Originally I was going to wait until around late fall/early winter to do a column about lentils and include a recipe for lentil soup. However I'm not going to wait because of a discovery I made recently in an Upper Lake health foods store. Not only do they have some beautiful red lentils but also the hard-to-find French green lentils.

Lentils are very high in protein (26 percent), second only to soybeans, which is one reason why they are so popular with India's vegetarian population (in India they are called dal or dahl). They also provide 90 percent of the US Recommended Daily Allowance of folic acid, higher than any other food. In addition they are high in iron and carbohydrates.

As I write this I'm thinking, "You always hear that pregnant women should get more folic acid, pregnant women should get more protein, pregnant women should get more iron; maybe we've found the perfect food for women who are carrying a child or two;" but then I remember that lentils were also considered an aphrodisiac so maybe lentils would just be a new can of worms. They are also rumored to make children more alert and studious.

Lentils come in many different colors, which makes for some fun choosing. The average mega-mart typically carries an olive drab type (actually called "brown lentils") which, although nutritious, are the least flavorful and makes an unfortunately-colored olive/gray soup or paste that looks like it should be used to spackle military installations.

Sometimes dried split peas are called lentils and they are used in many dishes with lentils, but they really aren't lentils and so won't be part of this discussion.

Lentils also decrease insulin requirements for diabetics (now, check with your doctor before any radical changes in your diet or I'll just point at you and laugh). Lentils make great soup, a unique side dish and can even be made into bread.

Naturally (no pun intended), I was thrilled when I found the brightly colored pink/orange (actually called "red") lentils in the health food store in Upper Lake. And the green lentils which actually are green with speckles of black are a treasure to find in the county.

Green lentils don't break down when cooked so they make a great side dish. They hold their shape and have a unique flavor reminiscent of black pepper. Green lentils are sometimes called Puy lentils since they originate and are revered in the Le Puy en Velay region of France.

The scientific name for lentils is *Lens Culinaris*, and larger types of lentils belong to the group macrosperma while smaller varieties belong to microsperma. No, that's not very interesting, but I wanted you to have the information anyway.

Lentils are considered to be one of the oldest cultivated crops with evidence of their domestication going back 10,000 years. Objects like your camera lens and the lens in your eye are actually shaped like lentils and therefore are named after them, not vice versa. They are mentioned frequently in literature throughout history. Even the infamous Greek gastronome Apicius had several recipes for lentils. They were the food of the rich and poor alike.

There are current studies showing that Great Britain experienced a "Mini Ice Age" from the 16th to 19th centuries where the climate was too cold for warm-season loving plants like lentils to grow. These findings are even backed up by insect, fish and many public records of the time.

In Hungary, traditionally a pork and lentil stew is eaten after midnight on Dec. 31 to ensure financial success in the New Year, both pork and lentils being symbols of prosperity.

Lentils are simply planted, grow best in poor soil, are easily harvested and winnowed, and so they have always been a very inexpensive food throughout the ages. Many cultures consider lentils as poverty food although they were buried in tombs with the pharaohs. The Egyptians even used them as packing material before the invention of those pesky Styrofoam peanuts. Over 100 tons of lentils were used to ship an obelisk from Egypt to Vatican City.

Lentils are a legume just like beans, but what really is a legume? A legume is a seed that grows inside a pod. So just count off in your head what's a legume ... beans, peas, lentils and, yes, even corn. Try calling corn a legume sometime and watch people as they try to figure out if you're correct or not.

When preparing lentils, always sort through them by hand to look for any rocks or stones. The manufacturer tries to remove all these it possibly can, but the technology and machinery to remove small hard objects out of a pile of small hard objects hasn't been perfected yet; it's like finding a needle in a pile of pins.

Green lentils retain their shape after cooking and take about 20 minutes to cook, while other lentils like red lentils dissolve during cooking and take only 15 minutes to cook. If you add anything acidic to the cooking liquid it will slow the cooking down, so you will need to allow some more time.

The French, I can only guess in honor of Esau from the Old Testament selling his birthright for a meal of lentils, named a dish of lentil porridge or stew "Potage Esau";

Esau's act has been fodder for biblical scholars for quite some time; after all, what could have been going on in his life to cause him to give away this right for just one meal? Evidently he was starving but why? Or did he really love lentils? The Bible never explains this point.

Lentils also are a traditional Jewish food to be eaten during mourning since they are round and have no mouth (it's a long story).

I don't consider recipes as biblical documents that should be copied without reconsiderations; rather I consider them as guidelines for you to start from, then take out what you don't like and add a little of what you do so feel free to play with this recipe.

#### Lentil soup

1 ½ cups red lentils 4 cups chicken stock or broth (with an extra cup set aside for later just in case) 1 slice fresh ginger (a disc the size of a quarter) 1 pinch nutmeg Cayenne pepper powder (I used dash of African bird pepper) 1 sprig thyme ½ medium onion, minced fine 1 clove garlic, minced fine 4-5 threads saffron 1 tablespoon butter Juice of one lemon

Melt the butter in your favorite soup pot. Add the onions and sweat until tender, then add the garlic and cook for one minute. Add the lentils and continue to cook until you start to see some of them start to turn yellow. Then add the chicken stock and bring to a boil.

Reduce heat and add ginger, thyme, nutmeg, saffron and pepper. Simmer for an hour, stirring occasionally. When the lentils have dissolved, thin the soup with water or stock to the desired consistency and finish with fresh lemon juice to taste.

Ross A. Christensen is an award-winning gardener and gourmet cook. He is the author of "Sushi A to Z, The Ultimate Guide" and is currently working on a new book. He has been a public speaker for many years and enjoys being involved in the community.

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