Go Exotic - Eat Papayas

Papaya is not commonly added to your everyday diet. This fruit is known for its sweet, rich flavor. It is a butter-yellow color when fully ripe and has a pear-like shape. The inside of this fruit has pale-orange flesh and is filled with black seeds. These seeds have a gelatinous texture; while they are edible, they are more bitter than the orange flesh of the fruit.

There are two main types of this tropical fruit. There is Hawaiian papaya, most commonly called Solo, and it is often found in local supermarkets. Solos average about one pound each and have the standard papaya pear shape and ripened yellow skin. The second type is Mexican papayas, and they are much larger. Mexican papayas can weigh up to 10 pounds and be more than 15 inches in length. The papaya skin can range from yellow to orange or even pink. Hawaiian papayas have a much more intense flavor than Mexican papaya.

A cut ripened papaya will be sweet, juicy, and have a similar flavor to cantaloupe. This is commonly eaten fresh with breakfast or dessert. It is also used as dried fruit, fruit salsa, fruit jams, and fruit juices.

If you find Hawaiian papaya in the local grocery store, add some to your cart! To pick the perfectly ripe papaya, look for skin turning from green to butter yellow. If you press your thumb slightly in the flesh, it is perfect. It is overripe if the fruit is soft or mushy when pressed and smells sweet. Make sure to avoid fruit with shriveled skin or dark spots. Slightly green papaya will ripen fast when left out at room temperature and placed in a paper bag. Papaya will go bad very quickly, so it should be stored in a plastic bag in the refrigerator when ripe. When it is kept in the refrigerator, it will keep for about a week, but it has the best flavor when eaten in one to two days to enjoy its maximum flavor.

Rinse under cool water to remove any dust or dirt to prepare your papaya. Now, let us talk about how to cut papaya: place it on a cutting board and cut the papaya lengthwise using a large sharp knife. Separate them into two sections and use a spoon to scoop the seeds out. After the seeds have been removed, you can cut the orange flesh into slices/cubes or eat the fruit straight out of the skin with a spoon. To peel the papaya, hold it vertically and run a knife downward along the skin in long slices like you would if peeling a potato. Do not slice too deeply into the flesh.

Most people eat papaya raw. This delicious fruit is terrific all by itself, mixed into a salad, or used as a topping for things like cottage cheese, yogurt, and cereal! It can be chopped and made into salsa as the perfect pairing with guacamole and chips or as a garnish for fish. Drizzling a little fresh lemon or lime juice over the top can dramatically enhance the flavor if you serve fresh papaya! Depending on the recipe, papaya can also be baked, sautéed, stir-fried, or pureed. If you feel adventurous, you can dry and grind papaya seeds and use them as a black pepper substitute.

Papaya is much more than a flavorful treat for your taste buds. This fruit is full of nutrients, and consuming papaya has many health benefits. Like most other fruit, papaya is most healthy when included in a low-calorie balanced diet. One small papaya has only 68 calories, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

It is no surprise that Christopher Columbus once named this deliciously sweet and buttery textured fruit "fruit of the angels." Keep a look out for this fantastic tropical fruit next time you shop at the local grocery store!

(Sources: American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology - acaai.org; www.britannica.com; www.usda.gov; webmd.com)