

Hazelnut Heaven

Do you love the flavor of hazelnuts? Let us discuss hazelnuts. So, what is it about these tree nuts that make them so irresistible?

Hazelnuts, also called filberts, are from the hazel tree. There are more than one hundred varieties of hazelnuts around the world. Hazelnuts are about the size of a small marble. The nut meat is encased in a hard shell that resembles an acorn without its cap. This sweet, cream-colored nut with a papery brown, subtly bitter skin can tickle your taste buds and give you many health benefits!

Hazelnuts are rich in nutrients, including vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and healthy fats. In addition, they are an excellent source of vitamin E and a substantial source of manganese. One-quarter cup of whole hazelnuts contains 212 calories. Over 80 percent of the total fat in hazelnuts is monounsaturated – the healthy fat.

Hazelnuts are sold raw (blanched or skin-on), roasted, chopped, or ground. Check whole hazelnuts for freshness by picking up a nut and shaking it. If it rattles inside the shell, this is an indication that it has lost moisture due to age or mishandling and is now stale. The nut shells should be smooth with no cracks, holes, or signs of mold. Finally, the nuts should smell fresh and nutty. If the nuts smell “off,” this may be a sign they have gone rancid. If buying shelled nuts, look for plump nuts with tight skins.

Did you know that the more nuts are processed, the shorter their shelf life will be? Therefore, it is best to process just before use. Unshelled hazels can be stored in a cool, dry place for about one month. Store shelled nuts inside an airtight container and place them in the refrigerator for up to four months to prevent them from turning rancid. They will keep for over a year in the freezer.

Hazelnuts have a variety of culinary uses. Hazelnuts are a great addition to all kinds of savory and sweet dishes. Whole or roughly chopped, they add crunch to cheese balls, salads, cream soups, bread, vegetables, casseroles, stuffings, sauces, cooked cereals, streusel toppings, pancakes, waffles, muffins, cakes, cookies, candies, and ice cream. Ground hazelnuts are delicious in meat coatings for breading or crust and as part of the flour in cakes, cookies, and bread.

Hazelnuts are free from gluten and, therefore, a safe alternative food source that can be used to prepare gluten-free foods for gluten-sensitive, wheat-allergic, and celiac disease individuals.

Roasting hazelnuts enhances their natural flavor while adding a little extra crunch in the process and develops their color. To roast kernels, spread shelled raw hazelnuts in a single layer on a rimmed baking sheet and bake at 275°F for 15 to 20 minutes or until the skins crack and the nut meats turn golden. To remove skins, wrap warm hazelnuts in a clean dish towel and let them sit for up to 10 minutes. Rub vigorously in the towel.

Hazelnuts make delicious homemade nut butter. Place 1 cup of shelled hazelnuts in a food processor and let it run until the nuts break down and hold together as a mass.

Hazelnuts are a versatile ingredient used in various sweet and savory dishes. From baked goods to spreads to main dishes, there are many ways to incorporate hazelnuts into your cooking.

(Sources: fdc.nal.usda.gov; nuthealth.org; oregonhazelnuts.org)