The Daily Reflector

B4

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LIFE

Give bland hummus a colorful makeover with sweet potatoes

In the contrarian spirit of fixing something when it is not broken, this recipe gives the ever-popular hummus a makeover. Hummus is a creamy Levantine dip consisting of pureed chickpeas, tahini, olive oil and lemon. It's agreeably mild-mannered and versatile and a go-to for dips, spreads and snacks.

LYNDA BALSLEV

Hummus is also wonderfully accommodating to embellishment and bling, such as the addition of pureed root vegetables and tubers, including beets and carrots — or in this case, sweet potatoes. These extra ingredients add oomph to the flavor and an infusion of color to the undeniably beige hummus, painting it in shades of fuchsia, ochre and green, depending on the accessory, thus transforming the ubiquitous spread into a vibrant flavor — and nutrient-packed dip that begs for a good swipe.

This hummus is indeed a looker. Orange sweet potato ramps up its color and lends a sweet, nutty note to the chickpea blend. You can steam the sweet potato to soften it; however, roasting is preferable, because it will coax out the natural sugars in the root vegetable and add little nicks of char and caramel to the dip.

Since the potato is naturally sweet, fresh lime juice and a generous sprinkle of seasoning and salt serve to balance the flavor. Taste the dip as you make it, and feel free to tinker to your preference. Serve the hummus with a kaleidoscope of crudites, pita wedges and chips for dipping.

LYNDA BALSLEV/TASTE FOOD

Roasted sweet potatoes lend a sweet, nutty note to the chickpea blend of hummus.

Sweet Potato Hummus

Active time: 10 minutes
Total time: 40 to 50 minutes
Yield: Makes about 2 cups
Ingredients:
2 sweet potatoes (1 1/2 to 2 pounds)
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 (15-ounce) can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
2 garlic cloves, chopped
1/4 cup fresh lime juice
2 tablespoons tahini
1 teaspoon Sriracha, or to taste
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1/2 teaspoon ground coriander
1/2 teaspoon sweet paprika
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
Steps:
Heat the oven to 425 degrees.
Halve the potatoes lengthwise. Brush the cut sides with oil. Place the sweet potatoes, cut sides down, in a baking dish or on a rimmed baking sheet lined with parchment. Roast until soft, 35 to 40 minutes. Remove and cool to the touch, then peel away and discard the skin.

Place the sweet potato and the remaining hummus ingredients in the bowl of a food processor and process until smooth. If too thick, add warm water, 1 tablespoon at a time, to achieve your desired consistency. Taste for seasoning.

Transfer the hummus to a serving bowl. Drizzle a little olive oil over and garnish with chopped fresh herbs, such as cilantro or mint, and chopped pistachios. Serve with pita bread and crudites.

Lynda Balslev is an award-winning cookbook author, recipe developer, tester and editor. Taste Food is distributed by Andrews McMeel Syndication.

Address vaccine booster concerns with your doctor

ASK THE DOCTORS

EVE GLAZIER

ELIZABETH KO

Hello, dear readers, and welcome to the bonus letters column that we promised several weeks ago. With a bonanza of mail, these extra letters columns help us keep up with your comments and follow-up questions. We've received a lot of virus and vaccine questions, so let's dive in.

■ The recommendations regarding booster shots continue to evolve, which has led to a bit of confusion. This includes a reader who received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine and a J&J booster.

"I understand that you can get an mRNA booster after the J&J shot," he wrote. "But I haven't seen anything as to when you can safely get an mRNA booster after receiving two J&J shots. Any guidance would be appreciated."

It is suggested that individuals who received the J&J shot-plus-booster series follow up with either the Pfizer or Moderna boosters four months after their last shot. Since this is a suggestion and not a formal recommendation at this point in time, it's a good idea to discuss a second booster dose with your health care provider.

■ Another aspect of the COVID-19 landscape that has continued to shift is FDA approval of the vaccines. In a recent column, we mentioned that the Pfizer vaccine has received Food and Drug Administration approval. This led a reader to say he has read otherwise.

"Although the vaccine was fully approved, research I have done indicates that version is not in use in the United States, but only in other parts of the world," he wrote. "Is this correct?"

The answer is no, this is not correct. There is only one version of the vaccine, and it is in use throughout the world. We suspect the confusion arises because the vaccine is offered under different brand names outside of the U.S. Despite that, all brand names of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine are biologically and chemically the same.

■ We get a lot of mail regarding antibodies, which are produced as part of the body's immune response to infection and following vaccination. A reader from Oklahoma had a question on the topic.

"I had COVID-19 in December 2020, prior to the availability of vaccines. I later got the Moderna vaccine (both shots), and I got my booster shot in October," she wrote. "I donated blood three or four times, and each time, my test result for antibodies was negative. Should I be concerned?"

No, there is no need for concern. In terms of COVID-19 infection, data shows that up to 40% of people test negative for antibodies. And when it comes to the COVID-19 vaccines and boosters, a negative antibody test does not mean you are unprotected. The protective mechanisms of the vaccines are complex, and efficacy does not rely solely on antibody detection.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to write to us. We read each of your letters and respond to as many as we can. A quick reminder that we cannot provide a diagnosis, offer a second opinion or comment on medications. Please stay safe and continue to take precautions against COVID-19.

Eve Glazier, M.D., MBA, and Elizabeth Ko, M.D., are internists and assistant professors of medicine at UCLA Health.

Fermented foods like Kimchi are fer-me and fer-you

As we watch the new COVID variant spread in other parts of our country, please, continue to wash your hands frequently, stay physically apart and wear your mask indoors.

KATHY KOLASA

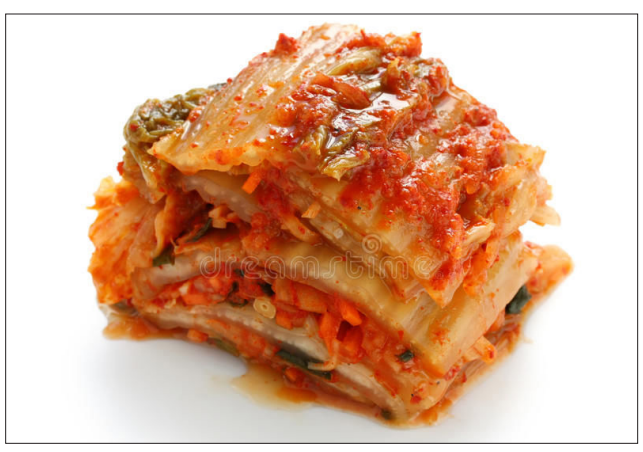
Q I have been told by my GI doctor to eat more fermented foods. I think of that being hard cider, but I doubt he meant that. What are they? Aren't they sometimes made with a salty brine? I have high blood pressure, so should I follow that advice to eat more? RK, Greenville

A Charles Park, a Korean American, and Arjun Bhatt, a Kashmiri American, third-year Brody medical students with a common love of kimchi, agreed to share their experiences with you and, as they said, give you "a fresh, fair-minded front on fermented foods." Here is what they want you to know.

Hey, thanks for coming over for dinner tonight! You can put your shoes there, and — oh, we can already see you sniffing about! What's that smell? So glad you asked! That's the smell of fermentation, a topic that really hits home to Charles because, as a Korean American, he grew up in a household that ate a lot of kimchi.

For those who aren't familiar with this stinky traditional Korean side dish, kimchi is a fermented food made typically of Napa cabbage and Korean radish. We always wondered about the health benefits of this dish and, in general, fermented foods, so we are excited to tell you what we found!

You're probably already familiar with some fermented foods. Yogurt is fermented milk, sauerkraut is fermented cabbage, kimchi is a mix of fermented cabbage and fermented radish, bread is fermented dough, and beer/wine are fermented grain/grape juice. Fermentation is, simply put, the process of breaking down sugars without oxygen to produce organic acids, like acetic acid known as vinegar or ethanol known as alcohol.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Kimchi is a Korean fermented cabbage dish.

So, yes, technically hard cider is considered a fermented food. And, no, fermented foods don't all have to be made with a salty brine. Fermented foods fall under three categories: probiotics, prebiotics and microbe-based foods. Probiotics are microbes thought of as good bacteria that are thought to enrich the human GI tract — or be good for you. Prebiotics are the food for the good bacteria in your GI tract.

Although exact standards don't exist to what constitutes a prebiotic, they are dietary fibers that increase the concentration of good bacteria like lactobacillus and bifido bacteria. Next time you're at the grocery store, check out what kind of bacteria are in your yogurt! Some examples of prebiotics include oats, barley and mushrooms.

Finally, microbe-based foods are foods with unclear health benefits with lots of bacteria — jury's still out on them if they are good, bad, or indifferent.

This isn't some new trend either — fermentation is an ancient practice, dating back to 10,000 BCE where it was used to preserve foods and stop them from going bad, especially in the summer. All it requires are friendly bacteria, which certainly existed tens of thousands of years ago — no fancy refrigeration or canning — making it a popular practice in remote and rural areas of the world across many cultures and geographical locations.

Recently scientists have learned that there are as many as 400-1,000 distinct species of up to 400 trillion microbes in our gut. This multitude of organisms in our gut is considered the microbiome. The gut microbiome is a population of probiotics that reside in the human digestive tract. These special bacteria make important nutrients for the body and aid in digestion. They also are linked to several disease states such as obesity, irritable bowel syndrome, and type 2 diabetes. There is even ongoing research that is seeking a link between the gut microbiome and mental health.

Besides potentially aiding GI health, fermented foods are rich with vitamins, and some are easier to digest than their nonfermented counterparts. For example, some bacteria can help digest milk during fermentation to make dairy products like yogurt and kefir that are better tolerated and safer to consume for people with lactose intolerance. The bacteria help does the digesting work for you!

Studies are inconclusive on the effects of fermented foods on cardiovascular health. So, while we wouldn't necessarily expect fermented foods to solve your heart disease, they can still be a fun way to spice up your diet, a good source of vitamins, and can help improve your digestion and nutrition.

So where can you get fermented foods in eastern North Carolina? Fermented foods can be purchased at grocery stores like Food Lion, Harris Teeter and Publix. Odds are, you already enjoy some in your day-to-day diet, but if you don't, they're easy to find if you look! Besides, as Charles' mom used to say, fermented foods are fer-me and fer-you!

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