

Real Foods that Heal
Weekly bulletin, volume 3, #12
November 18, 2008

Lentils, the “fast food” of legumes

Lentils will always hold a special place in the catalogue of foods that have been connected to important events in my life. It goes back to my young and single days as a medical student, when I was discovering not only how to cook, but discovering my own values. But more about that later.

For the moment, let's introduce a legume which is an under-appreciated star performer with an international pedigree. Legumes, you probably know, are the family more commonly referred to simply as beans. The list is too long to cover here, but includes pinto beans, red beans, black beans, navy beans, great northern beans, garbanzo beans (chick-peas), soybeans, and our small acquaintance the lentil. Humans have included legumes in their diets since before recorded history, and written history gives some hints of their value in civilization. In the book of Genesis, some scholars believe that the “mess of pottage” which Esau bought with his birthright from his scheming brother Jacob was actually a lentil stew. Lentils probably originated in the Middle East, and spread into south Asia where they became (as “dahl”) a staple of Indian cooking. They have always been and remain inexpensive, but don't let that fool you: they are of great value to you and your health!

Beans of all types, lentils included, are notable for their value in preventing heart disease. A 2001 study, reviewing years of data in thousands of people, concluded that legume consumption 4 or more times weekly compared to less than one time weekly, reduced coronary heart disease (translate heart attack risk) by 22%. There are very few prescription medications which can boast numbers like that! How do they do it? Beans are high in soluble fiber that reduces LDL-C and decreases insulin resistance (a key factor in type 2 diabetes). Beans are also low in sodium, and rich in the minerals magnesium, calcium, and potassium. Studies have shown overall that decreased sodium intake and higher intakes of magnesium, calcium and potassium decrease heart disease risk; as does substituting vegetable protein for animal. Legumes are also an important source of folate (which lowers homocysteine levels, an independent predictor of heart disease).

In addition to their remarkable reduction of heart disease risk, there are also a limited number of studies which conclude that legume intake is associated with lower risk of both prostate and stomach cancer.

So why don't we eat more of these things? Oh... right... it's that gas. Here's a way to reduce it. Always soak legumes overnight before cooking, and add 1/8 tsp of baking soda into the soak; discard the soak water and cook your beans in fresh water; this reduces the concentration of an indigestible plant sugar called raffinose that causes the gas problem. So even though lentils will cook easily without presoaking, it can help to make them more digestible.

And that special memory? About 1980, I took a baked lentils dish as my contribution to a church supper, and no-one besides me touched it. With a mixture of amusement, and the bruised feelings of a very young man just learning how to cook, I learned that my commitment to eating healthy and low on the food chain was not shared by most of my fellow Americans. Has that changed in almost 30 years? You decide.

Baked Lentils (from the More With Less Cookbook, Herald Press)

In a large saucepan, combine 1 lb (2 1/3 cups) dry lentils, 1 bay leaf, 5 cups water, 2 tsp salt. Boil, then cover and simmer 30 minutes. Discard bay leaf. Combine dry mixture separately before adding to lentils: 1 tsp dry mustard powder, 1/4 tsp powdered ginger (more if desired), 1 tbsp soy sauce, 1/2 cup (or more) chopped onions, and another cup of water. Stir all together, cover tightly in an oven safe dish and bake at 350 for one hour. Serve hot over brown rice. This is your main dish for dinner, and is a great substitute for those sometimes boring meat dishes we are accustomed to!

To your health,

Robert Pendergrast, M.D.

www.realfoodsthatheal.com

DISCLAIMER: The contents of this bulletin are for informational purposes only and do not render medical or psychological advice, opinion, diagnosis, or treatment. The information provided through this Web site should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. It is not a substitute for professional care. If you have or suspect you may have a medical or psychological problem, you should consult your appropriate health care provider. Never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read on this Web site. Links on this Web site are provided only as an informational resource, and it should not be implied that we recommend, endorse or approve of any of the content at the linked sites, nor are we responsible for their availability, accuracy or content.