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WHAT'S IN SEASON

CARROTS

This vibrant year-round staple tastes best in winter when its sugar content is highest

BY JAMIE COLLINS

Did you know that although carrots can be grown practically year-round in the Monterey Bay area, they are the tastiest when harvested and eaten in winter? This is because carrots, like parsnips, convert their starches to sugars when it turns cold, an adaptation that protects their cells from freezing when the temperature drops—and makes them an especially flavorful as well as beautiful seasonal vegetable for your winter menus.

COLORFUL HISTORY

Wild carrots evolved in many different colors and the ubiquitous orange color only appeared a few hundred years ago, apparently after seed breeders decided that orange carrots had the best flavor. If you talk to Ronald Donkervoort, who owns Windmill Farm in Moss Landing and sells his beautiful carrots at the local Santa Cruz farmers' markets, he will tell you a different version of the story common in his native Netherlands—that the orange color was developed by Dutch breeders as a tribute to William of Orange, who led the movement for independence from Spain. Sources such as the World Carrot Museum, an online compendium of lore about carrots (www.carrotmuseum.co.uk) say historians haven't proved this and the tale may be apocryphal, but still it persists, and it's an interesting story, befitting its colorful subject!

Lucky for market goers, carrots of all colors of the rainbow are widely available again today. They are being bred to be the deepest and darkest of the red, orange and purple carrot color spectrum to increase their healthful components such as anthocyanins (contained in purple varieties) and beta-carotene (red and orange varieties). If you were to visit India, the Middle East or Japan, you would find var-

ied colors of carrots are the norm because those countries never selected just orange. Seed banks and breeders in the United States now collaborate with their counterparts in these countries, hoping to bring back original carrot strains to be bred in the U.S.

NUTRITION AND FLAVOR

One would have to live under a rock to have not heard that carrots are great for your vision, thanks to their beta-carotene. But they also reduce cholesterol and lower blood pressure due to being rich in potassium, a vasodilator that increases blood flow and circulation. Carrots also have antibacterial properties which boost the immune system, and vitamin C which stimulates the activity of white blood cells. Carrots have tons of fiber, which aids digestion and helps prevent cancer—notably lung, breast and colon.

The flavors of carrots mostly come from volatile oils called terpenoids—these can be floral, spicy, citrusy, pine like and more. If the terpenoids are too strong, the flavor will be harsh. Therefore a nice balance of this compound paired with a high sugar content is what makes a carrot tasty. Imagine how many carrot flavors there are in the world. What fun it would be to try them all and what amazing dishes they would make if selected for their individual terpenoids!

CARROT VARIETIES

Nantes carrots are thin, sweet and 6–7 inches long with blunt tips that are good for breaking through heavy clay soils and rocky ground when other carrots fork and twist. They are less likely to get woody cores when left in the fields. Nantes are favored by chefs and easiest

for the home gardener to grow. A few of the best varieties are Nelson, Mokum and Yaya, which are quick to grow to a harvestable size.

Chantenay are shorter than others but have wider shoulders and are tapered with large foliage, which makes them best for mechanical harvesting. They store well, and are mostly used for processing into juice or “baby” carrots (which are actually not baby carrots at all but pieces of larger carrots that are rolled by machinery to create a small carrot). These come in red and orange varieties.

Paris Market type, aka Thumbelina or Tonda di Parigi, are round and stumpy, specialty orange carrots that are tasty whole next to roasted chicken and slow-roasted stews. They are great to plant if you have shallow soils as they only grow about 2 inches in length.

Kuroda carrots have good yields, are tender and sweet and make an excellent juicing carrot. Of all the tasty varieties of carrots, my all-time favorite to grow was a fat, dark-yellow kuroda called Kinbi, but I have been unable to find the seed for several years. When cooked, the Kinbi tasted a lot like sweet potato, probably due to higher starch content. I keep trying different yellow varieties but all pale in comparison to the Kinbi.

GROWING CARROTS

Carrots are some of the most rewarding vegetables to grow in the garden. Because they are directly seeded and like a sandy, loamy soil without rocks or hardpan, be sure to loosen the soil well before planting. In the soil make a shallow ¼-inch line with a pencil and plant by rolling the seed between your thumb and pointer finger while moving along the line, trying to plant about 30 seeds per foot. Space

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the lines at least 6 inches apart, or up to 18 inches in a farm row for ease of cultivation with a tractor. Gently cover the seeds, being careful not to place more soil than necessary. Keep the seeds moist until they emerge. The closer the carrots are planted, the more slender they will be. If they are too close, they will need to be thinned out or there will not be space for a carrot to grow into one worth eating. Depending on the variety, carrots are ready to harvest in anywhere from 65–80 days. As carrot seeds age, their germination rate goes down dramatically so be sure to buy only enough seed for one season.

It is best to plant carrots only once every three years in the same location. This keeps disease pressure at a minimum and reduces nematode (tiny worms that eat the carrot) pressure and improves soil health. Since carrots are in the Apiaceae family just like dill, parsley, celery, fennel and parsnips, it is also best to not follow carrots with any other Apiaceae crop.

Onions, radishes and aromatic herbs like rosemary and sage are good companion plants for carrots as they deter pests. Tomatoes are a great vegetable to grow between carrot crops because they contain a natural insect deterrent called solanine, which kills insects that harm carrots. Carrots are also beneficial to tomatoes because the loosened soil allows more air and water to get to the roots of the tomato plant. They will need to be planted far enough apart however or the tomato will block the sun and stunt the carrots' growth. Beans and peas are great to interplant with carrots because they add nitrogen to the soil.

SELECTING CARROTS

Choose carrots that are firm with fresh tops that are not wilted. Once you get them home, it is best to remove the tops and store them covered in the refrigerator. Oftentimes I store them in cold water in the fridge if I am going to use them within a day or two; this keeps them extra crisp and flavorful.

CARROT GROWING Q & A

Why would a carrot be woody, bitter and tasteless instead of sweet and tender?

These problems are due to environmental conditions while the carrot is maturing. A woody center can also mean the carrot plant was going to seed, perhaps because it was past its prime or was forced into flowering by extreme temperatures or light changes, causing it to try to procreate before dying. Carrots grow best when temperatures are between 40° and 80° F.

My carrots have swollen roots and galls on them. What would cause that?

Swollen areas on a carrot are caused by root knot nematodes, microscopic worms that restrict the nutrient uptake from the roots, causing a stunted plant. They live in the soil and can survive on many kinds of crops. Planting marigold flowers very closely for at least three months can help rid the soil of nematodes.

What if my carrots are forked?

Forked carrots occur when damage happens to the tip of a young carrot either by soil insects or various types of nematodes that eat the tip of the carrot, causing it to branch in different directions. The carrot should still be edible even if it doesn't look normal.

What does it mean if there are round, dark holes in my carrot?

Holes in the carrot are usually from wire worm damage. They cause necrosis of the carrot tissue and look unappetizing. This happens when worms come up to the part of the soil that is moist, instead of staying lower down. It could mean there was a lot of rain, or the carrots were overwatered.

Why do my carrots have a bunch of baby root hairs coming off them?

Your carrots were not watered enough! Little roots coming off the main one always mean feeder roots were searching for water.

LOCAL FOODS IN SEASON

December, January and February

Fruits: Apples • Asian Pears • Avocados • Grapefruits • Grapes • Guavas • Kiwis
Kumquats • Lemons • Limes • Mandarins • Oranges • Parsnips • Pears • Persimmons
Pomegranates* • Pomelos

Vegetables: Artichokes* • Arugula • Asparagus** • Beets • Bok Choy • Broccoli • Broccoli
Raab • Brussels Sprouts • Burdock • Cabbage • Cardoons • Carrots • Cauliflower • Celeriac
Celery • Chard • Chicory • Collards • Cress • Dandelion • Endive • Fava Greens • Fennel
Garlic • Horseradish • Kale • Kohlrabi • Leeks • Mushrooms • Mustard Greens • Nettles
Onions • Orach • Parsnips • Potatoes • Radishes • Rutabagas • Salsify* • Shallots • Spinach
Sprouts • Winter Squash • Sunchokes • Sweet Potatoes • Turnips

Fish: Abalone • Anchovies • Cazebon • Crab, Dungeness • Crab, Rock • Flounder, Starry
Grenadier, Pacific • Herring • Lingcod • Rock Cod, aka Rockfish • Sablefish, aka Black
Cod • Sanddabs, Pacific • Sole, Dover, Petrale and Rex • Spot Prawns

* December only

** February only

All fish listed are rated “Best Choice” or “Good Alternative” by the Monterey Bay
Aquarium’s Seafood Watch program. See
www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/seafoodwatch.aspx for more information.
Research assistance from **Real Good Fish** and **Serendipity Farms**.

MY FAVORITE WAYS TO PREPARE CARROTS

Carrot Ginger Soup: Simply peel 5 pounds of large carrots and cut in big chunks. Boil them in 1½ gallons of water until you can poke a knife into them. Blend cooked carrots in a blender or in the pot using an immersion blender. Add 1 quart of homemade chicken or vegetable stock or 2 quarts of store bought. Peel and finely slice fresh ginger—about three or four knuckles’ worth—and add to pot. Roast garlic cloves and blend in, along with 2 sweet onions and salt, to taste. Cook on medium for an hour or until flavors meld.

Roasted Baby Carrots and their tops: Baby carrots (real immature carrots, not the industrially tumbled kind) are great tossed with olive oil and salt and cooked on a baking sheet at 375 F° until roasted. Be sure to leave the last 2 inches of carrot tops on as they are crunchy and delicious when cooked.

Carrot Jalapeño Slaw: Grate carrots with finely sliced red cabbage. Add tiny pieces of jalapeño and cilantro and make a dressing of plain yogurt, lime juice and salt. Top with

an avocado if you have it. Great on its own or added to sandwiches.

Carrot Spread: Combine roasted carrots, tahini, fresh garlic, lemon juice, cumin, cayenne and salt in a blender. Use with flat-bread or even on some pasta! 

Jamie Collins is owner of Serendipity Farms, which grows organic row crops in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties and distributes them through a CSA, U-picks and farmers’ markets and a virtual farm stand which can be found on Serendipity’s Facebook page.

RECIPES: For Sur House executive chef Paul Corsentino’s Roasted Baby Carrots with Carrot Purée, Forbidden Coconut Rice, Honey Cashews and Cilantro, see p. 25; for his Shaved Carrot and Fennel Salad with Poached Shrimp, Mizuna and Citrus with a Carrot Vinaigrette and his Maple and Carrot Panna Cotta with Candied Almonds, see www.ediblemontereybay.com/recipes.



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For the relaunch of the newly renamed and reconceived Sur House at Ventana Big Sur, executive chef Paul Corsentino has created an all-new menu inspired by the bounty of stellar sustainable ingredients available on the Central Coast. He has also planted an on-site organic garden where he intends to grow about 10% of the produce used by his kitchen. A multitude of carrots are sure to be included.

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ROASTED BABY CARROTS WITH CARROT PURÉE, FORBIDDEN COCONUT RICE, HONEY CASHEWS AND CILANTRO

Courtesy Paul Corsentino, executive chef, The Sur House, Ventana Big Sur

Serves 5

Roasted Carrots:

- 4 bunches baby rainbow carrots
- ¼ cup olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons sumac

Preheat oven to 375° F. Cut the tops of the carrots and reserve them in ice water. Scrub the carrots with a rough dish sponge and water to remove all dirt. Toss the carrots in the salt, sumac and olive oil, and place on a baking sheet. Roast the carrots at 375° F until they are tender (about 25 minutes).

Carrot Purée:

- 1 quart carrot juice
- 3 large carrots
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Salt, to taste

Peel and rough-chop the carrots and cover in a pot with the carrot juice. Simmer until carrots are fully cooked. Reserve the juice. In a food processor, purée the carrots until they are smooth, along with the olive oil and a touch of the juice, if needed. Adjust seasoning with salt, to taste.

Forbidden Coconut Rice:

- 2 cups Forbidden Rice
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup coconut milk
- 1 teaspoon honey
- 1 teaspoon lime juice
- Salt, to taste

Combine all ingredients in a pot and cover. Bring to a boil then turn down to very low heat and cook for about 25 minutes until the rice is tender. Pour the rice out of the pot and fluff. Adjust seasoning with salt.

Cashews:

- ¼ cup cashews
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- Salt

Combine all ingredients and place on a baking tray. Roast in the oven at 350° F for about 10 minutes or until the cashews are golden.

Cilantro Pistou:

- 1 bunch cilantro
- ¼ cup olive oil
- Salt, to taste

Combine all ingredients and blend in a food processor. Season with salt.

To assemble: Place a tablespoon of the warm purée on the base of a plate. Place about five carrots on top of the purée in a crossover pattern. Then place three different, small piles of rice in three corners of the plate. Sprinkle the cashews over the carrots. Then drizzle the cilantro pistou over the carrots, and garnish the dish with the reserved carrot tops.



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