

AJO COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE



Spring 2009 / Week 8 of 13

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Planned harvest: Yukon Gold Baby Potatoes (2 lb bags), Red LaSoda Potatoes, Spring Mix, Green Onions, Chiogga Beets, Artichokes, Valencia Oranges and Nopalitos.

How to? ... Nopalitos

Nopales or *nopalitos* (once cleaned and prepared for eating by being cut into small pieces) are the young stems or pads of prickly pear cactus, and have served as a food source to native peoples of the Southwest and Mexico for millennia; however, for this region, historical ethnobotanists give contrasting views on whether nopalitos were harvested from the wild variety of the prickly pear, or they are a more recent introduction to the O'odham by the peoples from the south of the border, together with the domesticated variety of prickly pear called *nopal* or *tuna*. The young pads are picked from the cactus in the spring and they make a wonderful fresh spring food, all the more precious since the season only spans a few weeks; after that the skin becomes hard and thick; the pads can still be eaten, but must be peeled before cooking. You can store fresh (not wrinkled) nopales refrigerated, tightly wrapped, for up to two weeks.

The pads first have to be prepared, i.e. cleaned of the spines; handle them with care since the hair-like spines, or glochids, can easily get caught in your skin. To clean the whole pads, hold them near the base with a kitchen towel or gloves and remove the spines using a knife and scraping the pad away from you. Another way you can remove the "stickers" is by burning them over an open gas flame or over the grill. (Tania at the farm says that our nopalitos will be cleaned and ready to eat, so we can skip this step.) The tough rounded outside edge of the pads as well as the "eyes" are also removed with a small paring knife or a vegetable peeler. Wash the pads well with cool water and peel or trim off any blemished or discolored areas. Let dry, and then slice the pads in long slices or in pieces or leave whole depending on the dish you are preparing. Some cooks use the pads raw, but most agree that they need to be cooked. Nopalitos can be blanched for 1 to 2 minutes in boiling salted water until they turn bright green. Alternatively, some sources suggest boiling or steaming them for as long as 15 minutes, but overcooking may give them a slightly "slimy" texture you may want to avoid. After boiling the pads, rinse thoroughly under cool water to remove their gum, and drain well. The slimy gummy quality in the pads is caused by mucopolysaccharids, a type of carbohydrates, which can be broken down by weak acids such as vinegar, lemon juice, and tomatoes. Partial drying – either for a few hours in the sun or inside overnight – can reduce the gummy quality as well.

Nopalitos are usually used just like summer squash. They are added to eggs, or as a vegetable in soups, chilies or a filling in a tortilla. Mexican recipes often add chile, onions and cheese. They can also be sliced and added to salads. Tucson CSA suggests grilling the pads over hot coals until tender and slightly browned, then slicing into nopalitos strips and tossing with a squeeze of lime and a little bit of olive oil. A Tucson restaurant grills portobello mushrooms along with the nopales and slices both and serves them tossed together.

Eating in the Field (by Stephanie Doerries)

Fresh greens and other produce are a wonderful part of our diet, but incorporating them into a fieldwork-based lifestyle can be a bit of a challenge. The day before we leave for several days' worth of fieldwork, we prepare the ingredients for all of our meals. We make our own sauces of sautéed onions, garlic, greens, and some sort of tomato base (either some marinara sauce prepared before hand, some diced tomatoes, or store-bought sauce) to go with polenta, quinoa, couscous, and other grains. Pasta with homemade pesto sauce is another easy, delicious meal to have in the field. On a chilly desert evening during winter and early spring, curried sweet potato and carrot soup is a heartwarming dinner. Greens can also be incorporated into lunch. Anything leafy that suits your fancy is a great addition to a peanut butter sandwich. The greens provide a nice satisfying crispness and an astringent tinge that pairs well with peanut butter. Carrots, small kohlrabi, radishes, and small turnips make great snacks, too. However, nothing can beat the refreshing taste of a CSA grapefruit during a hot day in the desert!

RECIPES ETC.

Nina's Nopalitos Casserole/Dip (inspired by *The Tumbleweed Gourmet*)

1 clean and boiled or grilled prickly pear pad (whole or sliced in strips)
1 cup mashed tepary or pinto beans
½ cup enchilada sauce (canned or homemade)
¼ cup grated jack cheese

Preheat oven to 350° F. Arrange the pad or slices in a flat casserole dish, and spread with mashed beans. Cover with enchilada sauce and cheese, then bake for fifteen to twenty minutes until the sauce and beans are warm and the cheese is melted. Serve with tortillas or corn chips.

Nina's Bean Salad with Nopalitos (inspired by Tucson Chef Janos Wilder)

1 prickly pear pad, boiled, grilled or raw, sliced into ½ inch julienne strips
2 cups of cooked beans of choice (preferably with firm texture such as Scarlet Runner Beans, pinto, tepary etc.; canned is ok too)
½ white or red onion, thinly sliced into long strips
2 roasted and peeled red peppers (optional), sliced into bite-sized pieces
2 TBSP cilantro leaves picked off the stem

Toss with the Jalapeno Orange Vinaigrette dressing (below), and serve.

Janos' Jalapeno Orange Vinaigrette

1 jalapeno, seeded
½ cup orange juice concentrate
¼ cup chopped scallion
2 oz cider vinegar
¼ cup chopped cilantro
2 tsp fresh garlic
1 tsp salt
3 tsp freshly ground black pepper
1 ½ cup olive oil

Puree all the ingredients except the olive oil, and then slowly blend in the olive oil.

Nina's Pasta with Beet Greens and Beans

1 CSA bunch of beets, leaves separated, washed and de-stemmed
¼ white onion
1 tbs CSA chile flakes
2 garlic cloves
2 cups of cooked white beans
2 TBSP olive oil
1 can diced tomatoes
Salt, pepper to taste
Pasta of choice – Orecchiette, Fusilli, etc.
Freshly grated Parmesan cheese, Parmigiano-Reggiano or Grana Padana

As you boil up the water for pasta, warm up the olive oil, and sauté the onion with the chile flakes and a dash of salt. Add chopped beet greens and let them wilt, add sliced garlic, beans and tomatoes, a dash of freshly ground pepper and salt. Let simmer for about 10 minutes, or until thick sauce forms. Cook the pasta, drain while still al dente, transfer to a serving bowl and add the sauce. Lightly mix, sprinkle with cheese and serve.

Nina's Potato and Artichoke Strata

5 small or 4 large Red LaSoda potatoes, sliced
1 CSA portion of baby chokes (4-6)
6 Floyd's eggs (or 4-5 larger eggs)
2 cups milk
½ cup shredded cheese of choice
1 TBS canola oil
Salt, freshly ground pepper to taste

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Peel the artichokes to yellowish leaves, cut off the top third, and peel the stem. Steam 5-10 minutes, remove from the steamer and let cool slightly. Separate the leaves of the artichokes, or cut into thin slices. Oil a casserole dish, and arrange potato slices with artichoke slices. In a mixing bowl, combine the eggs, milk, cheese, salt and pepper, mix, and pour over the potatoes and artichokes. Cover with aluminum foil and bake for an hour or until potatoes are tender. Remove the foil and bake additional 10-15 minutes, or until the top is golden. Let stand 5-10 minutes before serving.