What to Eat Now: November

November's harvest includes many items you'd expect to see around the Thanksgiving table: sweet potatoes, cranberries, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, and fennel. Here's how to enjoy them at their best, with or without the turkey.

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In November, some of the world's most maligned vegetables come into season. If there's one thing Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, and fennel have in common, it's that people have *strong* opinions about them. If you're firmly in the "No way, José," camp, I don't expect to change your mind overnight. But as someone who formerly hated not one, but all three of these controversial vegetables, I've found that the right preparation and seasonings can help you see these healthy vegetables in a new light. Turns out I didn't hate them after all, I just hated them when boiled into limp mush. Who wouldn't?

While cranberries and sweet potatoes are a little lower on the list of unpopular foods, the tart berries and squash-like tubers can still be a hard sell to some palates. Again, the flavors you pair with them make all the difference — read on to learn all about the best ways to choose, prep, and cook these staples of the late fall harvest.

Brussels Sprouts

Brussels sprouts grow on a long stalk that extends around 3 feet; each stem in turn sports between 20 and 40 little sprouts. They look quite dramatic in their natural form! The high season for Brussels sprouts begins around American Thanksgiving after a few hard frosts have hit, sweetening up the green globes. Brussels sprouts have a reputation for their bitter flavor and sometimes offensive odor, but, prepared properly, you'll find they're truly tasty! With the right flavor combinations and preparations, you can accentuate their natural nutty flavor and leafy cabbage-like texture.

What to Look For

Sprouts that are smaller in size (under one inch across) will be infinitely more tender than the large globes you often find at the supermarket — your best bet to find these more delicate sprouts is at a farmers' market. Look for outer leaves that are devoid of holes or yellowing; you want firm, green balls with fresh, white stems.

Once purchased, store your sprouts in the vegetable drawer of the refrigerator for up to a week, but keep in mind that they become more bitter with every day that passes. As always, fresh is best! If you're lucky enough to find sprouts still on the stalk, this will extend their shelf life to two weeks or more.

Sprouts in the Kitchen

Prep your Brussels sprouts by removing the outer leaves and trimming the stem ends. To ensure the insides cook through, it's often helpful to halve or quarter your sprouts, depending on their size.

While boiling will help to temper some of the bitter flavors of Brussels sprouts, it will also leach out much of the nutrients, so steaming is preferred. My personal preference is to roast them in olive oil, allowing the outside leaves to caramelize and become crisp. Regardless of which cooking method you chose, be careful not to overcook Brussels sprouts, as this will increase the odor and bitter flavor, and lead to a mushy texture.

As a member of the cabbage family, you can pair Brussels sprouts with many of the flavors that would traditionally be paired with its kin. Popular preparations include bold, salty, and piquant flavors like bacon, mustard, paprika, sharp cheddar, or blue cheese (all of which, notably, pair well with beer). Brussels sprouts are improved by a squeeze of tart lemon or softer nuts like walnuts or pecans. To accentuate the nutty flavor of the sprouts, try roasting them and topping with a little brown butter, or pair with milder ingredients such as breadcrumbs and a touch of nutmeg.

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Crispy Roasted Balsamic Brussel Sprouts

IMPROV OVEN

★★★★½

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Brussels Sprouts Gratin

TWO OF A KIND

★★★★★

Shaved Brussels Sprout Salad

A FAMILY FEAST

Kung Pao Brussels Sprouts

LORD BYRON'S KITCHEN

Easy Brussels Sprouts Stew

HOLY COW! VEGAN REC…

★★★★☆

Brussels Sprouts Sweet Potato Sausa…

THE REAL FOOD DIETITI…

Korean Brown Rice and Brussels Spro…

THE HAPPY FOODIE

★★★★★

Cauliflower

Antioxidant-rich cauliflower grows in cool, moist climates, and the main crop appears in the fall. Cauliflower comes in a wide variety of colors including white, orange, light green, and purple. While the purple Violetta Italia, Violet Queen, and Purple Cape varieties are rarer, their heftier price tag is due not to scarcity but rather because they take 2-3 times longer to grow to maturity than the standard white Snowball. Popular orange varieties include the Cheddar and Orange Bouquet; the most commonly found green variety is the Green Macerata.

Caul' Me, Maybe?

Regardless of their color, all varieties of cauliflower are known for a mild taste that is enhanced by roasting. Unlike other types of produce, the size of the head doesn't affect the flavor, so buy them as big or small as you like for your intended dish. When not purchased wrapped in cellophane, cauliflower heads feature long, thick outer leaves which, while typically removed, are perfectly edible (try slicing them and giving them a quick saute).

The florets on the head should be compact and firm and the leaves should be crisp and green. The small brown spots you often see on heads of cauliflower are not mold, but bruises. While it's best to avoid these heads, it's perfectly fine to just trim bruised areas before use. Likewise, if you see pink tinges on the inside of the head when sliced, this isn't mold, but natural pigmentation resulting from the temperature the head was exposed to when growing.

Store heads of cauliflower in the crisper in their original packaging for up to five days; if bought without packaging, place a towel on the stem to help absorb moisture and extend the life of the white florets.

Cooking with Cauliflower

While cauliflower is often scoffed at as an insipid vegetable, the right cooking methods and seasonings make all the difference. My previous apathetic view of cauliflower was changed for good the first time my friend Marcy served me roasted cauliflower doused with olive oil and a heavy hand of curry powder (I now make it this way several times a month). Other strong flavors such as sharp cheddar cheese, mustard, sesame oil, horseradish, cumin, chili, and salty olives, capers, or anchovies turn cauliflower into an exciting dish.

To better taste the mild flavor of the cauliflower, pair it with other nuanced flavors such as leeks, parsley, cress, or green onion. And, like so many other things, cauliflower is fantastic when dotted with butter and breadcrumbs in a gratin, or bathed in batter and deep fried (serve with a spicy aioli or curried mayo for a treat you can't stop eating).

While roasting is my preferred method for cooking cauliflower, it can also be gently simmered in milk to make a mash, and the stems can be thinly sliced and added to a stir fry. Whatever you do, don't boil it. That's probably why you didn't like cauliflower in the first place.

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Spiced Cauliflower with Tahini

DISHING UP THE DIRT

★★★★⯪

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Purple Cauliflower Salad (Sicilian…

FEASTING AT HOME

Cauliflower Bisque

GARNISH WITH LEMON

Crispy Buffalo Cauliflower

IT DOESN'T TASTE LIKE C…

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Curry Coconut Oil Roasted Cauliflow…

YUMMLY

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Italian Giardiniera

THE SPICE KIT RECIPES

Crispy Cauliflower Tacos

A COUPLE COOKS

★★★★☆

Fennel

November is your last chance to catch this uniquely flavored vegetable before the fall crop starts to disappear from fresh markets. Fennel, known as *finocchi* in Italian, is sometimes labeled as anise — this is technically incorrect, although the two do share similar flavor profiles.

The flavor is often described as tasting like licorice, which is true … to an extent. Fennel seed, which is used as a spice (perhaps most famously in Italian sausage), has a far more pronounced anise-like flavor than the stalks, which are instead cooked like a vegetable, and have a mild, delicate flavor with a hint of anise that almost disappears when stewed. A member of the parsley family, fennel is similarly said to aid digestion and cure bad breath — sugared fennel seeds are commonly offered in Indian restaurants as an after dinner digestif.

The Best of Fronds

At farmers' markets and produce stores, you may find fennel with its leggy stems and feathery fronds still intact; mainstream supermarks, on the other hand, often sell the bulb trimmed of its stalks to make it easier to transport. While the stems are generally discarded, it's worth picking up untrimmed bulbs if you can so you can use the fronds for garnish or in place of dill when stuffing a fish. Choose fennel with bright green fronds, crisp stalks, and large round heads. In fact, the larger the bulb, the more tender it is. Bigger is truly better when it comes to fennel! Store your fennel in the refrigerator, where it will keep up to a week.

To Core or Not to Core?

Many recipes will have you remove the core from the bulb, but this is generally unnecessary, particularly if it's being chopped and stewed. Like apples (which pair beautifully with fennel, by the way), fennel will brown quickly once cut, which you can avoid by spritzing with fresh lemon juice.

Feasting on Fennel

While not a sweet vegetable, fennel is high in natural sugars and, as such, caramelizes beautifully when grilled or roasted. If you're new to fennel and aren't sure about the flavor profile, try braising it gently as a mild preparation to ease you into the world of cooking with fennel.

According to Chef Stephanie Izard, fennel makes a fine substitute for celery in stocks or other recipes that begin with a classic mirepoix of onions, celery, and carrots. Try her recipe for **Browned Butter Squash Soup with Spiced Seed Crunch** — available to Yummly Pro subscribers — to give it a whirl.

Delicate fennel plays well with the gentle flavors of scallops and shrimp, both of which benefit from a punch of acid from citruses like oranges or grapefruit. Wake up the flavor with sausage or sharp cheese, and serve with other seasonal vegetables like potatoes or sweet potatoes. For a stronger flavor, fennel can be sliced and served raw in salads along with parsley, cucumbers, olives, feta cheese, and a squeeze of lemon.

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Grilled Fennel Tarts

SPOON FORK BACON

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Orange Fennel Scallops

DIARY OF A MAD HAUSF...

Fennel and Onion Gratin

COLEY COOKS

★★★★⯪

Fennel & Celery Salad

PLATINGS AND PAIRINGS

★★★★☆

Pureed Fennel Soup

WILLIAMS-SONOMA

★★★★⯪

Lemony Fennel Relish

HEALTHY SEASONAL RE...

Sausage Fennel and Apple Stuffing

GARLIC AND ZEST

Sweet Potato

This brightly colored tuber is a member of the morning glory family and is, surprisingly, not related to white potatoes at all. Known as a superfood for its high nutrient content, the sweet potato is a powerhouse source of beta carotene. (Fun fact: Your body needs fat to convert beta carotene into Vitamin A, so go ahead and add that extra dollop of butter to your sweet potato mash!)

I Yam What I Yam

First things first. No, sweet potatoes and yams are NOT the same things, despite what your local supermarket might make you think. True yams hail from Africa and Asia, whereas sweet potatoes are native to the Americas. While markets in the U.S. sometimes label their sweet potatoes as yams, they're just … wrong.

Hello, Sweet Potato!

Sweet potatoes are characterized as either firm (dry) or soft (moist), with the most common varieties — the Jewel, Garnet, or Beauregard — falling in the soft category. Soft sweet potato skins range in color from copper to purple, while the squash-like flesh inside tends towards the expected deep orange color.

Dry varieties are less sweet and have undertones of chestnut in their flavor — in fact, they're sometimes mashed as a substitute for chestnut puree. Favored in Asian and Caribbean cuisines, dry sweet potatoes come in a wider variety of flesh colors from cream to yellow to magenta. Cuban Boniatos have very little sweetness, while the small Okinawan sweet potato falls on the sweeter side of the spectrum. Other popular varieties include the Kotobuki, Hannah, and Yellow Jersey.

Potatoes in the Pantry

Store your sweet potatoes at room temperature, away from light. Due to their thin skins, sweet potatoes don't keep as long as you might think, so use them up within two to three weeks. Like regular potatoes, the flesh will begin to discolor quickly once sliced and exposed to air, so toss cut pieces into a bowl of water as you chop them to prevent this. Or simply bake them whole and **leave the skins on for extra nutrition**!

Tasty Tubers

Sweet potatoes can be baked just as you would a regular potato, but be aware that the sugars may escape from the pointy ends, so do wrap them in foil or bake them on a sheet so that they won't drip on your oven floor. Looking to save time? Sweet potatoes can be **cooked in a pressure cooker** in nearly a quarter of the time.

Due to the high sugar content of moist sweet potatoes, they take well to dessert-like preparations and are often paired with sweeteners such as molasses or maple syrup, fruits like orange juice, apples, or dried apricots, and play nice with cream, bourbon, nutmeg, and cinnamon. For savory preparations, the sweetness can be balanced by meats like pork or duck, piquant goat cheeses, miso, and flavorful herbs and spices like horseradish, curry, ginger, cilantro, or thyme.

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Sweet Potato Roast with Parsley Pesto

DIETHOOD

★★★★★

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Tandoori Chickpea Stuffed Sweet Pot…

THE FULL HELPING

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Bourbon Sweet Potato Pumpkin Pie

CARNAL DISH

Best Spicy Sweet Potato Fries

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★★★★½

Easy Lentil, Sweet Potato & Coconut…

DETOXINISTA

★★★★½

Sweet Potato Soup

LIL' LUNA

★★★★★

Classic Sweet Potato Casserole

TASTE OF THE SOUTH M…

★★★★★

Cranberries

It simply wouldn't be the holidays without cranberries. Whether made into jelly or sauce for Thanksgiving or strung on long threads to decorate an old-fashioned Christmas tree, in November and December, the cranberry reigns supreme.

Colorful Cranberries

Cranberries are a low bush fruit that grows in cold-weather regions of North America. Smaller European cranberry varieties are found overseas, including their Scandinavian cousin, lingonberries. Commercial cranberries are often grown in marshy bogs, which are then flooded when ripe, allowing the buoyant berries to float to the surface where they're shaken from the stems and harvested en masse. (It's quite a sight to see the bright red berries bobbing in the moonlight, as I discovered in my late teens when a would-be suitor snuck me into a Cape Cod bog late one night.)

Caring for Cranberries

Cranberries should be hard when bought fresh; any softness indicates that they're on their way out. (As a side note, if you do intend to string fresh cranberries for your tree, use a sturdy needle and a thimble — cranberries are hard enough to make this a somewhat onerous labor of love). Cranberries keep well in the refrigerator for several weeks or can be frozen for up to a year, so feel free to stock up while they're in season.

Not Just for Thanksgiving

Cranberries make a deliciously tart counterpoint to sweet white or dark chocolate, maple syrup, or sweetened apples. Pair with pistachios for a pretty Christmas palette, or walnuts and chilis for a lively, crunchy treat. For a savory twist, cranberries also work well with cheese, mint, citrus, and, of course, turkey. Here's a couple of our favorite preparations.

GO TO RECIPE >

Cranberry Gingersnap Pie

VIEW FROM GREAT ISLAND

View Recipe

Yum

Cranberry Buckle

LEITE'S CULINARIA

★★★★★

White Chocolate Cranberry Blondies

THE RECIPE CRITIC

Cranberry Fluff Salad

THAT SKINNY CHICK CA…

★★★★★

Cranberry Pecan Baked Brie

DAMN DELICIOUS

★★★★☆

Turkey Grilled Cheese with Cranberr…

LIFE TASTES GOOD-US

Cranberry-Orange Relish with Mint

BON APPÉTIT

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