ARTICLE / YUMMLY COOKING STORY

What to Eat Now: December

To close out the year, sturdy workhorses such as turnips, celery, and Romanesco sit alongside our favorite holiday fruits: pears and mandarin oranges.

Joanna LeRoy
Posted Dec 2, 2019

"*Well the frost is on the pumpkin and the hay is in the barn.*" It's officially wintertime, folks. (OK, fine, on the 21st, for all you literalists out there). The leaves have dropped from the trees, seasonal farmers markets have shuttered for the season, and New Englanders are already having their second snow day of the school year. But fear not! Storage vegetables, hardy brassicas, and fruits from the warmer regions are here to ensure you're well nourished and delighted all winter long. Lets see what's in the larder this month, shall we?

Celery

A versatile workhorse in the kitchen, celery is known by everyone, but *loved* by … none? Unassuming in taste and character, it's not the type of vegetable that's prone to win over die-hard fans. But it wasn't always this way. Celery had its heyday in the Victorian era when it frequently graced the table, raw, in crystal celery vases. Today, while hardly glamorous, you'll find a bunch of celery in most crisper drawers around the U.S., ready to be chopped for a mirepoix, filled with peanut butter for a healthy toddler snack, or used to satisfy oral fixations in dieters and reformed smokers.

Despite its lackluster press, celery does have a season … and it's now! Winter is the best time to find celery from the West Coast, where it flourishes in the cooler weather by the oceanside. The standard bunch celery we're accustomed to comes in several varieties, including the Giant Pascal, Tendercrisp, and Victoria. A rarer pinkish-hued variety is also available, although more often found outside the U.S. A third type of celery, known as chopping celery or Chinese celery, has a much more robust flavor.

A Stalky Fellow

When choosing celery, consider buying organic, as it's known to contain a high level of pesticides when commercially grown. Look for large, firm stalks (larger stalks are actually more tender), with a pale (not dark green) coloring. It's perfectly normal to find dirt collecting inside the stalks close to the base, so wash them well before using.

True to its versatile nature, all parts of the bunch can (and should!) be used: Save the base and the trimmings from chopped stalks to use in flavoring stocks, and chop up the leaves to use alongside fresh herbs in sauces and garnishes.

There's more to celery than meets the eye when cooking, as well. Yes, it can be used to start off many a sauce when mixed with carrots and onions for a classic mirepoix or used to add crunch to your tuna salad or Thanksgiving stuffing, but it's also worth exploring in other forms. Pick up some celery salt (fantastic sprinkled on a steamed hot dog) or make like a New Yorker with a refreshing celery soda like Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray to accompany your favorite deli sandwich.

When not stewed up as a base, celery pairs nicely with fruits such as pears, nuts, cheeses, olives, and olive oils, making it a steller vegetable to include on your crudite tray. While you're at it, place a stalk in your favorite bloody mary and raise a glass to this humble veg!

GO TO RECIPE >

BEST Homemade Cream of Celery Soup

DARING GOURMET

★★★★½

View Recipe

Parmesan Celery Salad

101 COOKBOOKS

★★★★★

Celery Salt

A FORK'S TALE

Easy Celery & Leek Frittata

REBEL'S KITCHEN

Blue Cheese-and-Pecan-Stuffed Celery

EVERYDAY WITH RACHA…

★★★★★

Celery Gimlet

SHUTTERBEAN

Sweet And Sour Celery Cilantro Salad

WILL COOK FOR FRIENDS

★★★★★

Romanesco

Sometimes called Broccoli Romanesco, other times Romanesco cauliflower, this is one veggie with an identity crisis. The fractal-shaped *brassica* is, in fact, neither cauliflower nor broccoli (nor a hybrid of the two), but is more closely related to cauliflower and broccoflower than broccoli.

Romanesco is protected by an outer layer of sturdy green leaves, which should be free of brown spots when purchasing. To prepare romanesco, trim the outer leaves and slice off the base. While romanesco may be cooked whole, you'll more commonly want to cut it into florets. To do so, start from the base and trim away the stems that branch off the central core, cutting them down further until the florets are the size you want.

A Tale of Two Brassicas

Best known for its dramatic appearance, pointy romanesco has a nutty flavor reminiscent of broccoli with a touch of sweetness; texturally, it has more in common with cauliflower. What this means for you, the home cook, is that you can prepare it like cauliflower, but match the flavors like you would broccoli.

Like cauliflower, be careful not to overcook romanesco, as it will turn mushy and insipid. Make the most of its unique shape by using large chunks of gently steamed romanesco in salads and sautes, or make your own holiday landscape like this adorable scene from Brit & Co.

GO TO RECIPE >

Cute Christmas Side Dish Recipe Alert! Romanesco Holiday Trees…

BRIT AND CO.

View Recipe

Romanesco Cream Soup

SPRIG OF THYME

Pan-Roasted Romanesco with Golden R…

HOUSE AND HOME

Black Rice + Romanesco Bowl

WELL AND FULL

Broccoli Romanesco and Parmesan Pur…

MARTHA STEWART

Nutty Roasted Romanesco Curry

SEARCHING FOR SPICE

Romanesco Tarte with Bacon

COOKING IN SENS

Turnips

December seems to be the month for vegetables with publicity problems. Historically used to feed livestock (sheep love them!), turnips have an undeserved reputation as a poor man's vegetable. But like many maligned vegetables, a little knowledge can help you pick the best, tastiest specimens and see the root in a new light.

Start by considering the different varieties available. The vast majority of turnips found in the grocery store are the large Purple Top White Globe variety, a hearty winter storage turnip. If buying this type, look for globes that are 3-4 inches around (larger turnips develop a bitter flavor that contributes to the turnip's poor reputation) and show no signs of decay around the root end. The leaves, which are both edible and nutritious, are frequently stewed in Southern cooking in much the same way you would collard greens, so hang onto the leaves if they are attached.

At farmers' markets, you may find yellow-fleshed varieties such as the Golden Globe or Amber Gold Perfection, which are fine-grained with a sweeter flavor. Small, young turnips, also known as Japanese salad turnips, are much more delicate with a sweetness that allows them to be eaten raw or sauteed whole with their tender greens attached.

Turnip the Heat!

Turnips are easy to prepare — peel the larger ones, slice off the root end, then chop and parboil in salted water to help them soften up before finishing off in the oven or over the stove. With a texture similar to a potato, they can be prepared similarly, and often appear alongside traditional spuds in hearty winter stews.

Turnips pair nicely with a variety of other root vegetables, including carrots, parsnips, and rutabagas. They're frequently combined with other comforting winter flavors such as bacon, savory herbs, apples, piquant cheeses, mustards, and onions, and have gained popularity as a lower-carb alternative to potatoes.

GO TO RECIPE >

Turnip And Thyme Gratin

LAUREL STREET KITCHEN

View Recipe

Yum

Mashed Turnips

MASALA HERB

Pickled Turnips

DAVID LEBOVITZ

★★★★★

Keto Potato Fake-Out Roasted Turnips

HOW TO THIS AND THAT

★★★★★

Crispy Turnip Fries

SLENDER KITCHEN

★★☆☆☆

Turnip Noodles with Eggs and Chives

ITS A VEG WORLD AFTE…

Chinese Turnip Cake

JEANETTE'S HEALTHY LI…

Satsuma Oranges

Satsuma oranges (also known as satsuma mandarins) are, as the name suggests, a type of mandarin orange — a small, squat member of the citrus family. Satsumas are the most common (and arguably most delicious) variety of mandarin in the U.S., originating in China and coming to the states by way of Japan.

Clementines and tangerines are two other mandarin varieties; with their similar appearance (and modern-day marketing) it's quite understandable if you get them confused. So what's the difference? Tangerines are the largest and most acidic of the three, followed by clementines, and then satsumas, which are the smallest, juiciest, and sweetest — and worth seeking out.

Common features of all mandarins are that they're easy to peel and seedless (or at worst, may have a couple very small seeds). Mandarins have a sweet-tart flavor with less acid than oranges, with satsumas being the cream of the crop. With their thin, easily-removed skins and small size, these fruits are portable lunchbox favorites and good for snacking.

Home for the Holidays

In part due to their appearance in markets in the November/December timeframe, satsumas have become intertwined with holiday traditions, be they tucked into the toe of a Christmas stocking or presented as a gift of abundance and good fortune during Chinese New Year a month later.

Choose satsumas that are heavy for their size with shiny, dotted orange skin. They'll feel softer to the touch than an orange — slightly "puffy," even — as the skin is held to the fruit by a loose web of fibers quite unlike the thick pith of other citrus fruits. When storing satsumas, it's best to avoid the fridge, which can cause the flavor to fade; more importantly, you'll want to avoid keeping them in plastic bags, which can encourage the growth of mold. Instead, keep your satsumas in a cool place with plenty of air circulation, such as a festive fruit bowl (sprigs of evergreen optional).

Satsumas can be used interchangeably in recipes that call for clementines (like that drool-worthy cake below), but do keep their sweeter flavor in mind when using in recipes that call for oranges, and make adjustments as needed. As the perfect pocket fruit, they rarely need much preparation beyond peeling; however, they also take well to slow stewing in a compote or turning into a puree for a cocktail that will brighten up the coldest winter night.

GO TO RECIPE >

Clementine Cake

LEITE'S CULINARIA

View Recipe

Yum

Satsuma Cocktail

MYRECIPES

Almond Pancakes with Satsuma Compote

THE ALMOND EATER

Satsuma Soak Cake

PROBABLY BAKING

Satsuma Salad

COOKING ON THE WEE...

Candied Satsuma Peel

MYRECIPES

Seared Sea Scallops with Satsuma, P...

MYRECIPES

Pears

Another holiday favorite (thanks in part to our friend the partridge), pears have been revered since the time of the ancient Greeks. Pears are part of the rose family (along with their cousin, apples) and come in a wide variety of colors, flavors, and textures. One of the sweetest of fruits, pears have virtually no tang but are prized for their indulgent nectar. Here's a quick overview of some of the most commonly found pears in the U.S.:

Soft pears

Anjou: a common green winter pear; short, squat, mild, and juicy.

Bartlett: yellow-green with a classic pear shape; juicy, soft, and sweet with a musky fragrance. The primary type used in canning.

Comice: matte yellow-green fruit with bluish tints, also known as a "Christmas Pear." Known for its meltingly soft texture and prized for eating straight out of hand.

Firm pears

Bosc: tall and elegant, with matte golden-brown skin and a pronounced scent. Perfect for poaching.

Seckel: small, green-yellow, with firm, almost spicy flesh; a traditional home-canning pear.

Asian pears: round, golden pears quite unlike others. Crisp like an apple, with a light, refreshing flavor.

Pears' growing season also depends on the variety: Anjou and Bosc bosc have the longest growing season, being available from fall to spring, whereas Bartlett and Comice pears (also first available in the fall), go out of season by end of winter.

Warning: Pear-ishable Produce

Because pears are quite delicate, you'll want to buy them when fully grown but not yet ripe — they should be hard, without bruises or blemishes, when purchased. Store at room temperature to ripen; once ripe (you'll feel the pear start to give a little when pressed at the stem end), you can move it to the fridge for up to a week. Alternately, for longer storage, you can store unripe pears in the fridge, and bring them out to room temperature a few days before you intend to use them to finish ripening.

Pears don't require much in the way of preparation (particularly if you're just going to take a big bite!). The peels are, of course, edible, but you'll generally want to remove them if you'll be cooking with your pears. The flesh will brown quickly once exposed to the air, but you can soak them in lemon water once cut to avoid discoloration.

Flavors that go well with pears make the fruit a perfect fit for baking: brandy, chocolate, spices, vanilla, and ginger all bring out the best in the pear. Similarly, hard pears make beautiful and tasty additions to a cheese board, where they act as a wonderful foil for hard cheeses, nuts, and red wine.

GO TO RECIPE ›

Pear Frangipane

BBC

★★★★☆

View Recipe

The Best Pear Butter You'll Ever Ma…

OH MRS. TUCKER!

★★★★★

Pear and Elderflower Martini

KITCHEN SWAGGER

★★★★★

Pear Brie

WHAT WILL WE DO TODAY

Pear Tart with Goat Cheese, Rosemar…

HOME AND PLATE

Blue Cheese, Pear, and Honey Toasts

YUMMLY

Flourless Chocolate Pear Cake

MY NATURAL SELECTION

Hungry for more?

Check out other articles in our **monthly fresh produce series**.

- Produce
- Vegetables
- Fruits
- Seasonal
- Pears
- What to Eat Now