

Posted on Thu, Jan. 7, 2010

Garlic in a new hue: Black



By Dianna Marder Inquirer Staff Writer



It is nothing more than garden-variety garlic, *Allium sativum*, that is fermented with heat for 30 days and packaged to sell for twice the price, but the taste is entirely different.

Black garlic? Yes, indeed.

It is nothing more than garden-variety garlic, *Allium sativum*, that is fermented with heat for 30 days and packaged to sell for twice the price, but the taste is entirely different. You can eat it raw or cooked without experiencing heartburn or garlic breath.

And while black garlic is not entirely new, it is most likely new to you.

First imported from South Korea by a California-based company, BlackGarlic.com, in 2008, black garlic appeared in dishes at Bix in San Francisco and Le Bernardin in Manhattan. It showed up among the ingredients on the Food Network's *Top Chef* and *Iron Chef America* shows. It has appeared on some local menus (Fork, Zahav). And you may be inclined to try it at home in 2010.

You'll find it at Wegman's in Cherry Hill (a two-ounce bag for \$4) or Iovine's in the Reading Terminal Market (two bulbs for \$5.99).

Such is the price of fame, and, maybe, health.

Brian Han, who works in sales at BlackGarlic.com, says the company's initial intent was to market it as a "natural food medicine," which is the other hot trend in home foods for 2010.

"It is high in antioxidants," Han says, "but we found out that to get the benefit, you have to eat a whole lot of it."

Soon after, Han says, "Bix restaurant used it on a lamb chop and everybody heard about it and that's how we changed our marketing."

At Fork restaurant in Old City, chef Terence Feury, who abhors trends, says he got samples of black garlic in the summer of 2008 and used it in a sauce with roasted corn for his soft-shell crabs. Loved it, he said, but when the soft-shell season ended, he somehow never went back to it.

"That's the way it is with some ingredients," Feury says. "Fennel pollen came and went."

But black garlic is nothing to ho-hum about, Feury says. "It packs a lot of flavor into a small package. I really liked it."

Just as kimchi is fermented cabbage, black garlic is garlic that has been fermented with heat.

"Nothing else," says Han. "No soy sauce added, like some people think."

When heated at a fairly high temperature for 30 days, the natural sugar in the garlic is drawn out and the result is a bulb with tan exterior and peeled cloves that are black.

(By the way, elephant garlic is a different variety, more closely related to a leek. It has a very mild garlic flavor and a texture that's more like a potato.)

Han says the company is moving toward buying more of the stuff from California growers instead of importing. For now, he sells it online fresh in bulbs, peeled in jars, as puree in jars, and as a concentrated juice for use in salad dressings and in cooking soups and stews.

Peeling the cloves will leave a bit of residue under your fingernails and on your cutting board. But black garlic is nowhere near as messy as salsify. (You remember salsify, of course. That was the "in" root vegetable of the year in 2006. But salsify left a white, gooey substance on cutting surfaces, and added little in the way of flavor to compensate for the mess and bother.)

"I love black garlic," Zahav chef Michael Solomonov declared in a recent interview. He describes the sweet but savory taste as between tamarinds and dates.

Steep it in warm water for three to four days, he says, then puree before adding it to a recipe. That way, the flavor is not as pungent and won't overwhelm the dish.

Solomonov adds black garlic to the seasonings in ground veal for his grape leaves, but says it also works in soups. And he imagines making a black garlic ice cream when the weather warms up.

"Or steep in vodka for a Bloody Mary," he says dreamily.

I tried it at home several ways: spread on a cracker and topped with a bit of smoked salmon (great); sliced thin and baked into the crust of white pizza (very yummy); mashed and cooked briefly with balsamic vinegar and white wine as a sauce for seared scallops (see recipe) and blended with Amaretto and sherry as a poaching sauce for fresh nectarines (see recipe).

My guests agreed that eating a sliver raw on a cracker is the best way to get to know the flavor of this ingredient before cooking with it.

Black garlic is not a substitute for white garlic. I didn't try it in the classic Italian recipe Chicken With 40 Cloves of Garlic, but my bet is that you'd want to use far fewer than 40 cloves, and the result would be an Asian, not an Italian, dish.

Dan Vena, the fourth generation in the family at Vena Produce in the Food Distribution Center, is a local distributor.

"I took some home and messed around with it," Vena said. "People are scared of it at first, but it's pretty cool stuff."

From www.weshipproduce.com:

Black Garlic

General Information: Black garlic is garlic that has been aged for one month in a special fermentation process under high heat, where it develops its darker color, softer texture, and sweeter taste.

The flavor is a wonderfully complex mix of molasses-like richness and tangy garlic undertones. It has a tender, almost jelly-like texture with a consistency similar to a soft dried fruit. It is not a substitute for regular garlic but has its own distinct flavor.

The black garlic has nearly twice as many antioxidants as raw garlic. It also contains the natural compound, S-Allylcysteine.

Available at Coosemans Shipping by the 1 lb. increment – try some this winter.