



California Chestnuts

Native to North America, chestnuts were once plentiful until almost 4 billion American trees succumbed to a fungal disease in the early 1900s. Fortunately, domestic chestnut cultivation is returning to small family farms in California's Central Valley where chestnuts of consistently excellent quality are being produced.

The California chestnut season is in the fall, and precedes the European harvest by almost two months. Most of the commercially grown chestnuts in the state of California are the *Colossal* variety. This is not in reference to their size, but their lineage; these modern nuts are a European and Japanese hybrid that are large and sweet while also being less prone to suffering from blight.

The *Colossal* variety is high in fiber, predominantly composed of carbohydrates and with just a trace of fat and no cholesterol. Chestnuts are more nutritionally similar to other starchy foods such as potatoes, rice or cereals. Chestnuts are the only nut with any vitamin C. Unlike other nut varieties, chestnuts are usually sold fresh but must be stored as a perishable food, refrigerated like other fruits and vegetables. To store chestnuts after purchase, they *must* be refrigerated. Chestnuts can also be frozen in their shells or dried and ground up to make flour.

Before eating, fresh chestnuts are almost always cooked. Roasted or boiled chestnuts have the consistency of potatoes, and are often served as a side dish. To roast chestnuts, cut an X into each shell (to allow steam to escape) and roast them on a sheet pan in a 400° oven for about twenty minutes. While they're still warm, peel off both the shell and the *pellicle*, the thin astringent membrane surrounding the flesh. Alternatively, boil the chestnuts for about 15 minutes, and then remove them from the water with a slotted spoon. Peel off the shells and put the nuts back in the boiling water for another minute, then remove them again and peel off the skins.

California chestnuts are harvested in small quantities from 5-80 acre farms throughout Central and Northern California. Regionally grown, delicious, high-quality California chestnuts are being reintroduced to culinary markets to enhance winter menus with their rich, sweet, nutty flavor and firm texture.

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Poached Lobster with Spiced Bisque, Carrots & Chestnuts

We think of chestnuts as in ingredient for stuffing to accompany a holiday bird, but chefs all over the country are using chestnuts in deliciously unique ways. Chef Bryce Shuman of [Betony](#) in New York City created [Poached Lobster with Spiced Bisque, Carrots and Chestnuts](#). History suggests that the first Thanksgiving featured lobster, so this dish is a nod to tradition.

[Chef Patrice Olivon](#), Program Director of Culinary Arts at L'Academie de Cuisine in Gaithersburg, Maryland, created a smooth, creamy soup, [Artichoke and Chestnut Velouté with Caramelized Apples](#) that's another riff on a hearty starter for fall/winter meals.

Fresh chestnuts are frequently used in fall/winter desserts and many chefs are eager to explore novel ways to present them. Bill Corbett, whose restaurant, [Absinthe](#) is in San Francisco, offers a seasonal dessert of Smoked Apples with Chestnuts and Buttermilk. Corbett suggests that the familiar flavor of the apples makes a smoked dessert more accessible to diners who may hesitate to be adventurous in the last course.

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