
DESERT WISDOM YOUR MOTHER NEVER TOLD YOU

BY KEVIN DAHL

Unless you grew up with traditional Mexican cuisine, it's unlikely cactus was served at your family's dinner table. But consider this: young pads of the Prickly Pear Cactus—called nopales or more affectionately nopalitos—make a delicious, healthy ingredient for hundreds of dishes. Nopalitos are a mainstay vegetable in Mexico, with millions of acres in cultivation so that the average person there consumes about 15 pounds annually. In our Valley, it grows like a weed in every neighborhood and in many wild desert areas, and can be found in supermarkets and on the menu of some Mexican restaurants.

To try this desert delicacy, think of it as a versatile vegetable. It can substitute for green beans in a bean salad, fill an omelet, be added to soups or stews, stand alone as a side dish (cooked simply with butter and salt; sautéed with onions and garlic; or served swimming in enchilada sauce), or be eaten breaded and fried like okra or eggplant.

Nopalitos are truly nutritious. A half-cup serving of cooked nopalitos (only eleven calories) provides half the daily requirement of vitamin C, and is a good source of fiber, vitamins A and K, potassium, iron, magnesium, manganese, and calcium.

In Mexico, cactus pads are a traditional cure for diabetes. Research has shown they help control blood sugar, having one of the lowest glycemic ratings. The large amount of soluble fiber and pectin (the mechanism cacti use to capture and store water) gives nopalitos this healthy quality.

The healthy soluble fiber shows up in freshly cut cactus pads, which will ooze sticky goop that can be used like aloe

to treat cuts and burns. The gooey property goes away with cooking. There are literally hundreds of species of Prickly Pear, with pads (which by the way, are really just flattened, succulent stem segments) having a variety of tastes and textures. You can try young pads of any kind of Prickly Pear, which usually appear in the spring and early summer. The one most commonly used for nopalitos is the large, spineless variety called Indian Fig Prickly Pear (*Opuntia ficus-indica*). These grow all over town, making great hedges or large specimen plants that can grow from 10 to 20 feet tall.

Cooks report that fresh whole pads are best to cook with, either newly harvested or purchased from the produce section.

To gather your own nopales, harvest the pads mid-morning or later to avoid them being too acidic (a result of their desert-adapted way of doing photosynthesis at night). Wear gloves, and use tongs and a sharp knife, avoiding needles and the small stickers called glochids. Glochids are deceptively disguised as small fuzzy patches surrounding larger needles. They get in your skin and are devilishly hard to remove. If stuck, using glue or cellophane tape can be helpful.

If you do your harvest in the supermarket or farmer's market, choose small, green, firm pads free of blemishes and

with no fibers at the base. At home, they will last for a week or so in the refrigerator wrapped in damp newspaper, but the fresher they are used, the better. Some supermarkets offer pre-cut nopalitos, and you can always find them prepared in bottles (drain and rinse before using).



Young cactus

Eat Your Cactus!

Back to the whole pads. Scrape them with a sharp, flexible knife or peeler, removing needles and glochids as well. Depending on the recipe, you will slice them into strips (like green beans) or dice them into chunks. Before using them, fresh nopalitos are often boiled for 10 to 30 minutes or sautéed for five minutes. Some cooks prefer to brush the whole skinned pad with oil and then grill it before cutting. In any recipe, nopalitos will readily absorb the flavors they are cooked with.

The cactus is easy to grow, either from seed or easier still from pads cut from an existing cactus. Prop the pad upright out of the ground for a week or two until the cut develops a callous. Plant the calloused pad an inch deep, callous down, orienting the pad so the large flat sides face east and west to prevent sunburn on the vulnerable new cactus. Anchor it in place with rocks, if necessary, and don't water for a month. To form a thick hedge, plant pads a foot apart.

Growing, harvesting, cooking—all great things to do with nopalitos—but if you are not yet convinced, be sure to at least order it sometime as an entrée or side dish at one of our fine Mexican restaurants. It's way past time for this food to cross the culinary border.

NOPALITOS

Both whole and prepared fresh cactus pads can be found at Food City (multiple Valley locations, www.myfoodcity.com) and at Ranch Market (four Valley outlets, www.prosranch.com).

If you don't grow your own, and want to ensure that your cactus is organic, you can order it from the www.rivenrock.com website (yes, we know they're in California).

On Saturday, February 25 from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. you can sample nopales at the World Desert Fair at Boyce Thompson Arboretum, 37615 U.S. Highway 60, Superior, aboretum.ag.arizona.edu.

Local restaurants that often serve nopales include Los Sombreros, 2534 N. Scottsdale Road in Scottsdale, (480) 994-1799 and Coyoacán Steakhouse, 9014 S. Central Avenue in Phoenix, (602) 323-9010. Or, if you can maneuver a Spanish-speaking-only restaurant, try the puerco con nopales at Mini Mercado Oaxaca, 9407 N. Central Avenue Phoenix (602) 395-0867.

For recipes, *The Prickly Pear Cookbook* by Carolyn Niethammer (Rio Nuevo Publishers) tells you how to cook both the pads and the fruit of the cactus.

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

**IT'S ALWAYS
A GOOD TIME
TO SUBSCRIBE,
RENEW,
GIVE A GIFT,
OR PURCHASE
BACK ISSUES!**

****Back Issues Make Great Gifts!!!****

**Just fill out the card on the right
and send it in by fax or mail.
Or call the number below to
pay by credit card.**

**Edible Phoenix
Tel: (602) 361-7363**

Yes, I want to become a subscriber to Edible Phoenix. I have filled out the form below and am sending it, along with my check made payable to Edible Phoenix, in the amount of \$28, (for 4 quarterly issues), to: Edible Phoenix, PO Box 9519, Phoenix, AZ 85068.

Start my subscription with the Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter issue.

Renew my subscription

Gift Subscriptions Available

You may
photocopy
this form.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

email (optional): _____

For more information or to submit story ideas, call or email us at:
(602) 361-7363, or info@ediblephoenix.com.

Edible Phoenix is published quarterly by Nibble and Scribble LLC., PO Box 9519, Phoenix, AZ 85068. Telephone: (602) 361-7363. Distribution is throughout the Phoenix region and nationally by subscription. All rights reserved. Subscription rate is \$28 annually. Published Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter. Call the number above to inquire about advertising rates, deadlines, or subscription information or email us at: info@ediblesanfrancisco.net. No part of this publication may be used without written permission of the publisher. © 2006 All Rights Reserved.

Edible Phoenix is printed on recycled paper.