

Tofu – Think Outside the White Block

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(HealthNewsDigest.com) - I recently attended a cooking demonstration sponsored by House Foods, a leading US supplier of tofu and organic tofu. Like many Americans, I associate tofu with Asian or vegetarian dishes, but this cooking demonstration definitely made me think outside the white block.

What is tofu? The main ingredient is soybeans. To produce the white familiar blocks, soy milk is coagulated and pressed into custard-like cakes. It's been used in China for more than 2000 years and was probably introduced into Japan by the spread of Buddhism in the latter part of the eighth century. Use in the US is relatively recent outside of Asian communities but its draw is increasing and today you can buy tofu in most supermarkets.

Why should you consider introducing tofu into your kitchen? Because, it is good for you and a very adaptable ingredient. In today's tight economy, it is a great meat substitute or meat extender. Rich in protein, a half-cup portion substitutes for a serving of meat with 10 grams of protein. In contrast to meat and poultry, a half-cup of tofu is very low in total fat (5 grams), has less than 1 gram of saturated fat, no cholesterol, and only a trace of sodium (15 milligrams). If the coagulant used is calcium-based it can be an excellent source of calcium with 250 milligrams in a half-cup serving. Contrast that to 300 milligrams of calcium in a glass of milk.

Using tofu regularly contributes to a lower risk for heart disease, reduces the severity of hot flashes, protects postmenopausal women from colon/rectal cancer, and promotes bone health. Research suggests that tofu can provide a feeling of fullness after eating and its low glycemic value assists in blood sugar control. No one is suggesting that tofu alone is a magic food but as a substitute for higher fat, higher cholesterol, lower calcium choices it is a healthy addition to your diet.

Tofu is a whole food, containing intact soy protein. Eaten in this form, experts believe it is safe and the health benefits are clear and positive. The controversy surrounding soy focuses on isoflavones, specific isolated components of soy often used in a supplement

form. Isoflavones, weak estrogen-like compounds, when used in large amounts might increase the risk of breast cancer. The research on soy compounds and cancer is far from conclusive. But, regularly using a concentrated isoflavone supplement is far different than making an occasional stir-fry with tofu. Stick with soy as a whole food.

What makes tofu such a versatile ingredient? In recipes tofu acts like a sponge soaking up any flavor with which it comes in contact. Crumble it into chili and it tastes like the spicy sauce. Blend it with cocoa and sweeteners and it can double for chocolate pie filling. It can be purchased in blocks in 5 levels of firmness or bought crumbled, baked, smoked or marinated. Soft or silken is best for dips, salad dressings, sauces, smoothies or cheesecake. Medium works well in casseroles, soups, salads, or when you are not sure what firmness to use. Firm and extra firms are best for crumbling and stir-frying.

Tofu is a good protein extender and does not need to substitute entirely for the meat, fish or poultry you enjoy. Substitute tofu for one-third to one-half of the chop meat in meatballs, meatloaf or chili. Add crumbled tofu to crab or salmon cakes. Extend the protein in a stir-fry or casserole by adding slices or cubes of tofu in addition to the chicken, steak or seafood in the recipe. Add cubes of tofu to soup to turn it into a main dish. Use soft or silken tofu as the base for dips and smoothies, lowering the fat and enhancing the protein.

Unlike meat, which is both flavored and tenderized by marinating, tofu starts out tender. Marinating is simply to add flavor and that can be accomplished in as little as 15 minutes, especially if the marinade is heated before adding it to the tofu.

Though all the recipes at the recent tofu demonstration were delicious and different than the usual fare, my favorite was Tofu Gnocchi which could be served with an Italian bolognese sauce, a cream sauce, teriyaki sauce or simply drizzled with olive oil and a sprinkle of fresh herbs.

Tofu Gnocchi

Serves 4 to 6

2 (12 oz) packages extra firm tofu, cut into chunks

1 cup tapioca flour

1 teaspoon salt

Blend tofu at high speed until smooth. Transfer tofu puree to a bowl and add tapioca flour and salt. Mix well and let stand for 10 minutes.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil.

Spoon tofu puree into a pastry bag with a ½ inch round tip. Squeeze mixture directly over boiling water cutting off ½-inch pieces.

Cook gnocchi in batches. Let gnocchi rise to the surface and continue cooking for 1 minute after floating. If using immediately drain on a paper towel and place into prepared sauce. If using later, place into a bowl of ice water for a few minutes, drain on a paper towel, and store in a covered container in the refrigerator.

Recipe: Compliments House Food USA

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Jo-Ann Heslin, MA, RD, CDN is a registered dietitian and the author of the nutrition counter series for Pocket Books with 12 current titles and sales in excess of 7 million books. The books are widely available at your local or on-line bookseller.

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