

sometimes you feel like a nut



Washington nut growers go out on a limb to offer some unusual varieties. | by Melody Moss

The idea of chestnuts roasting on an open fire may evoke nostalgia for this time of year, but have you ever actually tasted a chestnut? Ever seen one hanging from a tree in its prickly burr? If you answered no, you're not alone; these days most of us are more familiar with tropical nuts than those grown closer to home. The Northwest has much to offer nut fanciers, however, including a few varieties you may not recognize.

East of the Cascades in the Okanogan Valley, Spencer Scott's organic farm produces several examples of a very common nut: the walnut. Scott purchased his farm near Tonasket five years ago and named the 35 acres King's Table Orchard and Gardens. Most of the farm is devoted to tree fruit and vegetables—he grows peaches, pears, and apples among other crops—but on one acre he cultivates a variety of 40- to 50-year-old walnut trees, the most recognizable of which is the Carpathian, a cold-weather strain of the common Persian, aka English, walnut. The most unusual of Scott's walnuts, on

the other hand, is his favorite, the heartnut. This variant of the Japanese walnut is more common in Canada than in the United States and can replace other walnut species in any recipe. It can also be eaten right out of the shell. A quick tap with a hammer opens the heartnut shell like a locket to reveal a distinctive heart-shaped kernel. The nut's sweet, creamy flavor—without the bitter aftertaste of most walnuts—makes it especially suited for delicately flavored dishes, and what could be more romantic atop deserts meant for two?

On the other side of the Cascades, near the town of Lynden and the Canadian border, the Holmquist family specializes in hazelnuts, which they've been growing for five generations, since 1928. Originally a sideline to a dairy business, Gerald Holmquist eventually decided to give hazelnuts top billing; he now runs Holmquist Hazelnut Orchards with his two sons, Richard and Brian, and other family members.

Also known as filberts, hazelnuts are a familiar part of Northwest cuisine, due



Hand 'em over Holmquist Orchards' hazelnuts

LET THEM EAT NUTS

Nuts provide a high amount of nutrition and are exceptionally versatile. Beyond the usual sweets and snack bowls passed around during the holidays, try them in breads, salads, soups, stuffing, sauces, and savory side dishes.



CHESTNUTS

Like a grain that grows on trees, the low-fat, starchy chestnut is a unique nut. It has few calories and high water content, making it quite perishable in its fresh form. Keep fresh chestnuts refrigerated in a perforated plastic bag. They will last up to two weeks this way, or up to a year if vacuum-sealed and frozen. Dried chestnuts must be rehydrated, and both fresh and dried chestnuts should be cooked before eating.

Allen Creek Farm (360-887-3669; www.chestnutsonline.com)

HAZELNUTS

High in monounsaturated fats, Vitamin E, and folate, dried hazelnuts can be eaten on their own or roasted lightly in the oven for more flavor. If sealed in an airtight container, shelled hazelnuts can last up to a year in the refrigerator, or two years in the freezer.

Holmquist Hazelnut Orchards (360-988-9240; www.holmquithazelnuts.com) The Holmquists also have a stand almost every day at Pike Place Market.

WALNUTS

While somewhat similar to hazelnuts in taste, texture, and nutritional composition, walnuts are higher in polyunsaturated fats and are an excellent source of healthy omega-3 fatty acids. Store and consume shelled walnuts as you would hazelnuts, above.

King's Table Orchard and Gardens (509-429-7826) Spencer Scott is at the Sunday Ballard Farmers Market this winter.

savory chestnut plum strudel



Recipe courtesy Eric Tanaka, executive chef for Tom Douglas Restaurants

STRUDEL INGREDIENTS

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| 1½ cups all-purpose flour , plus extra for rolling | 1½ cups ricotta cheese |
| 1 tablespoon sugar | ¾ cup roughly chopped roasted and peeled chestnuts* |
| ¼ teaspoon salt | 1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme |
| 8 tablespoons cold unsalted butter , cut into cubes | Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste |
| ¼ cup sour cream | 1 large egg yolk , lightly beaten |
| 2–5 tablespoons cold water , as needed | 1 large egg yolk , beaten with 1 tablespoon cold water for egg wash |
| ½ cup dry red wine | |
| 6 ounces (1 slightly heaping cup) pitted dried plums | |

MAKES
6
SERVINGS

PREP TIME
1½
HOURS

DIRECTIONS

Dough: Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Combine flour, sugar, and salt in the bowl of a food processor and combine. Add butter and pulse a few more times until butter and dry ingredients form a crumbly mixture. Add sour cream and pulse to combine. Add water and pulse again until dough begins to clump together. Remove dough, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate 2 hours or more.

Filling: Put wine and dried plums in a small saucepan and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer 5 minutes. Turn off heat, cover pan, and steep 20 minutes. Drain the dried plums and roughly chop them. Set aside. In a bowl, combine ricotta, chestnuts, and thyme, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Fold in egg yolk, then gently fold in chopped dried plums.

On a floured surface, roll dough into a rectangle about 8 by 16 inches and trim rough edges. Evenly spoon the filling onto the center third of the rectangle in a narrow log lengthwise, leaving about 1½ inches of dough uncovered on either end. Lightly brush the short ends with egg wash. Bring one of the long sides of the pastry over the filling and brush the edge with egg wash. Fold the second flap over the first, pressing gently to seal. Brush the short ends with egg wash, fold, and press gently to seal. Ease strudel onto a baking sheet lined with parchment paper; the seam should face the baking sheet. Bake until golden brown, about 35 to 40 minutes. Remove from oven, let cool at least 20 minutes, then cut into slices and serve alongside roast chicken, pork, or duck.

*For instructions on roasting and peeling chestnuts, see www.chestnutsonline.com/peel.html

largely to the number of orchards in Oregon's Willamette Valley. The Holmquists are among only a handful of Washington producers, and location is not the only distinction they enjoy. While they also grow the more familiar Barcelona and Ennis varieties, the family's pride and joy is the DuChilly, a hazelnut not commonly grown commercially. The thin-skinned, ovoid DuChilly is widely considered sweeter and superior in taste, but according to Richard, the nut's lower yield and stubborn husk, which must be removed during processing, make it less popular among modern growers. "It's harder to handle, slower growing, and oblong-shaped, three things the industry found more difficult to deal with than the rounder varieties," he says. The Holmquists also have to contend with their northern climate, which means rushing to finish the fall harvest before the snow comes, but the effort pays off. The Holmquists sell their hazelnuts in a variety of preparations—natural, dry roasted, flavored, and in flours and oils—nearly all of which are produced at the farm.

Now getting back to "The Christmas Song": Chestnut trees once made up about a quarter of eastern North American forests until a 1904 fungal blight, imported via Asian chestnut trees, nearly destroyed the native American species (not to be confused with the inedible horse chestnut). Just north of Portland at Allen Creek Farm, however, Ray and Carolyn Young, ages 70 and 69, are growing chestnuts for that open fire.

The Youngs retired from their teaching and engineering jobs in Southern California seven years ago, and purchased a 20-acre farm in Ridgefield, Washington, hoping to make an independent living and get more space for their basset hounds. They planted 10 acres of blight-resistant Japanese-European hybrid trees that produce a large chestnut called the Colossal, and three years later harvested their first crop. The Youngs established a prolific Web-based business, selling fresh chestnuts in the fall and winter and dried chestnut products year-round. After purchasing a stone mill and learning to make chestnut flour from millers in the mountains above Tuscany, the Youngs began producing soup, bread, and pancake mixes from their farm kitchen. The nut farmers have found a real niche among those following gluten-free diets. Ray and Carolyn do all of the milling and processing themselves: "We don't need a personal trainer," jokes Carolyn. "We have an orchard!"

In the future you may find an even wider variety of nuts to choose from in the Northwest, as demand increases and growers plant more trees. Almonds—the most popular tree nuts worldwide—often do well in areas where peach trees thrive, and Spencer Scott is considering adding them to his orchard out in the Okanogan. 🌰