

Published in Sauce Magazine, January 2006

Similar Benefits, Less Work Canned and frozen fruits and veggies can help you keep your resolutions

By Lisa Lance

It's the start of another New Year...what's your New Year's resolution? For many Americans, the obligatory pledge involves a change in eating habits. Whether we want to lose weight or just improve our well-being, eating healthier food is a good place to start.



Experts agree that one important step toward eating healthier is to introduce more fruits and vegetables into our diets. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005 report recommended adults eat two cups of fruit and two and a half cups of vegetables a day. And, according to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a diet rich in fruits and vegetables may reduce the risk of diseases such as cancer.

So, you want to start eating more fruits and vegetables...but you're unfamiliar with how to cook them and really don't want to spend money on food that will wither and die in the rarely used crisper in your refrigerator. Why not use canned and frozen fruits and vegetables instead? They are inexpensive, easy to store and readily available anytime of the year. Plus, they save you time by eliminating the need to peel, chop or slice.

Even the pros take advantage of the time-saving benefits of packaged produce. Dierbergs School of Cooking manager Loretta Evans said she uses canned and frozen fruits and vegetables in her cooking classes all the time. "When you cook with frozen or canned vegetables, they do make prep work easier. And they have a better shelf life, so you can buy them on sale and have them stored for a length of time if needed," she said.

Keith Shannon, frozen-foods category manager for Schnuck Markets, said that convenience is a factor for his customers. "The frozen products are easily stored and are always right there when you need them," he said. "This is a plus for some people who don't get to the store as often."

What about nutrition? "Canned and frozen vegetables actually compare well with fresh ones," said Diane Andrea, registered dietitian, licensed dietitian and education coordinator for St. Luke's Hospital's community outreach department. Citing a University of Illinois Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition study, she said the dietary fiber, Vitamin A, carotene and folate content of foods

hold up well in the canning process. In fact, the nutritional content of some foods actually benefits from canning. For example, the lycopene found in tomatoes is more effective when heated or canned.

As long as consumers avoid canned products labeled high in sodium, said Andrea, canned and frozen fruits and vegetables can be used for all their recommended daily servings. “I think using canned or frozen fruits and vegetables, especially in the winter, is an excellent way to incorporate these foods in their diet,” she said.

What criteria should be considered when choosing packaged fruits and vegetables? Andrea recommended looking for canned vegetables with “no salt added” on the label, choosing fruits canned in 100 percent juice and selecting fruits and vegetables with peels intact. “Consumers will probably find their favorite brands,” she said. She suggested trying store brands or “off” brands because some of these are produced by well-known manufacturers.

Your choices as a consumer may be influenced by where you shop. “We concentrate mostly on offering our Schnucks private-label brand in the frozen fruits and vegetables category,” said Shannon. He explained that since fruits and vegetables are natural products that need very few or no additives at all, there is very little variation in this type of product and therefore it is not necessary to carry a lot of variety.

There are several easy ways to add more fruits and vegetables to your diet by taking advantage of canned and frozen varieties. Make your own pasta sauce with canned diced tomatoes. Many manufacturers offer varieties with seasonings such as basil, oregano and garlic to add extra flavor and save even more time. Top a baked potato with thawed frozen broccoli. Put together a quick, colorful fruit salad using canned pineapple and mandarin oranges (drained) and a chopped Red Delicious apple. This can be stored for days in the refrigerator as the citric acid of the pineapple and oranges keeps the apple from turning brown.

Andrea suggested adding frozen fruits to a smoothie or adding blueberries to pancake mix and using applesauce in place of fats and oils in bread or muffin recipes.

You can even modify recipes to use packaged fruits or vegetables instead of fresh, although, Evans said, it is easier to substitute frozen products for fresh than it is to substitute with canned products. “Frozen fruit is wonderful, and you can make some things that would be considered more seasonal year-round by using frozen fruit,” she added.

After you’ve had some practice cooking with canned and frozen vegetables and discovered your favorite dishes, you might want to make the switch to fresh produce.

Some things to keep in mind if you're unfamiliar with using fresh fruits and veggies, cautioned Andrea, are to make sure fresh produce is cleaned well and that raw fruits and vegetables are cut on a different cutting board than is used for working with raw meat. Also, when cooking fresh vegetables, it is better not to overcook them. She suggested using a steamer to cook them just until tender or some other quick cooking method to retain as much nutritive value as possible.

With the relative convenience and low cost of canned and frozen products, adding fruits and vegetables to your diet is easy. This may just be the one New Year's resolution you keep. Start incorporating these foods into your diet now and you'll be ready to hit the farmers' markets when spring arrives.