

The Versatile Pumpkin

FAR BEYOND THE PIE

Liz Tarditi



PUMPKIN SEASON ARRIVES WITH QUIET FANFARE. Suddenly local farm stands brim with sugar pie pumpkins, and even the most practical pantry has a can or two of this seasonal ingredient waiting its turn.

A happy, bright and versatile food, pumpkin stands ready to enhance many recipes. It grounds a dish with earthy depth, brings velvety texture to the mix and surprises us with easy shifts from savory to sweet. As a foodie with more of a salty tooth than a sweet one, I enjoy the savory side of pumpkin the most.

As I write my first Brandywine Table column, I'd like to share a bit more of my background. My path to the kitchen wasn't linear, but it was inevitable from the moment I unwrapped my first Easy-Bake Oven and later graduated to slice-and-bake cookies.

I always was and will be a foodie, though I didn't recognize food as my own art until I earned my culinary arts degree at the Art Institute

of Seattle. After graduating, I launched Today's Gourmet, my catering company, where feeding people was both craft and joy. Those experiences taught me the magic of bringing people together at the table and set me firmly on this path.

Years later, back home in Pennsylvania, my work evolved again. I spent two decades in the most important kitchen — in my own home. Feeding my family, learning the rhythms of home cooking, and proving daily that good food doesn't need to be complicated to be meaningful helped me hone my craft. This was all while juggling work and life as a retail wine specialist. Wine may be my day job, but food has always been my compass, where curiosity, creativity and my stars align.

That's why I'm delighted to join Brandywine Table after years of reading this column, admiring how it honors local farms, kitchens and traditions. Here, I'll get to bring together the threads of my experience — food, storytelling and the shared table — right where they belong, in conversation with the people and flavors of our region.

So, when *County Lines*' editor Jo Anne Durako suggested pumpkin as the theme for my first column, it felt like, well, coming home. Pumpkins are familiar yet full of surprises, just waiting for us to look past the expected pie. Roasted in simple cubes, enhancing a tartine, skewered with bacon and onions, or baked into bread for a seasonal tres leches dessert, pumpkin proves again and again that it's more than a holiday cliché. It's the taste of autumn itself — cheerful, nourishing and always ready for the table.

I look forward to celebrating the flavors and traditions of Chester County and our local region at Brandywine Table.

Simple Roasted Pumpkin – Two Ways

Let's start with one sugar pie pumpkin, two easy preparations, many creative options. Roast it in wedges with butter and brown sugar, or peel and cube the pumpkin with olive oil and seasonings. Both ways highlight pumpkin's natural flavor and versatility. A perfect autumn dish!



Serves 6

Small sugar pie pumpkin (about 2 lbs.), washed and stem trimmed
1 tsp. kosher salt
Optional: 1 T. total chopped fresh herbs (rosemary, sage, lavender or thyme) or 1 tsp. total dry spices (cinnamon, clove, nutmeg or ginger)
Optional: use either 6 T. cubed butter or $\frac{1}{3}$ C. olive oil

Preheat oven to 350°. Line a baking sheet with a silicone mat or parchment. Cooking times will vary with the size of the pieces of pumpkin.

For wedges with butter and brown sugar:

Halve the pumpkin, scoop out seeds and pulp. Cut into six wedges ("boats").

Arrange cut-side up on the prepared sheet. Sprinkle with salt, 1 tsp. brown sugar each, and optional spices. Place 1 T. butter in each wedge.

Bake 35–45 minutes, until fork-tender and bubbling.

For cubes with olive oil:

Halve, peel and scoop out the seed and pulp. Cut into 1-inch cubes.

In a large bowl, mix olive oil with salt and optional seasonings. Add pumpkin cubes, toss to coat and spread on the sheet.

Bake 25–35 minutes, stirring once, until tender but still firm.

Serving Notes: Finish either preparation with fresh herbs before serving. Browning — even deep browning — is desirable for that distinctive flavor (the Maillard effect). Trust your senses: when it smells delicious and is fork-tender, it's ready!

Fresh Pumpkin Tartine Canapes

If you've never eaten a bite of a sugar pumpkin, you're in for a treat! Its texture is like a cucumber without seeds, but floral and only slightly sweet, almost like crunching into a hard pear. Tartine, a French dish, is a small open-faced sandwich. Here, we make them even smaller to serve as a canape, but this could be a very nice small plate if you use a wider loaf.



Serves 6

1 long, thin loaf of dense heavy bread, sliced (pumpernickel, multigrain, rosemary, olive)
8 oz. Cambozola or extra-soft gorgonzola blue cheese
 $\frac{1}{4}$ sugar pie pumpkin
Choice of hot honey, honey, balsamic glaze or pomegranate syrup for drizzling
Fresh soft baby thyme and baby sage leaves, to taste

Prepare the pumpkin: cut into a large wedge, peel the skin, remove the seeds and pulp. Then, using a vegetable peeler, shave the pumpkin into thin ribbons.

Spread the blue cheese generously on the bread, to the edges. Stack the pumpkin ribbons, about three to five for each bread slice. Then cut the ribbons to the size of the bread.

Lay pumpkin on top of the cheese, drizzle with topping of choice and garnish with fresh baby herbs.

Bacon-Ribboned Pumpkin & Pickled Pearl Onion Skewers

Pumpkin loves smoky, nutty and sweet flavors, so any kind of bacon is a natural pairing. But also consider pairing with cured smoked salmon, Gruyere and Parmesan cheeses for creative twists. The sweet-sour pickled onion gives this dish a tangy pop. A great hors d'oeuvre for cocktails.



Pumpkin Seeds – Tiny Powerhouses

Pumpkin seeds may be small, but they pack a mighty punch. High in protein, magnesium, zinc and omega-3 fatty acids, they're one of fall's most underrated snacks.

Roasted with shells on, they deliver an extra hit of fiber, making them as good for you as they are fun to crunch. Unshelled seeds can be bought year-round, but there's something deeply satisfying about scooping seeds fresh from your own pumpkin and roasting them until they're harvest golden.

I fondly remember making pumpkin soup for a dinner party years ago and sprinkling roasted seeds on top as garnish. A friend, who was a chef with her own busy restaurant, stopped mid-bite and asked, "Wherever did you get the seeds to sprinkle on top?"

I was puzzled, then took a beat and realized: "Of course! They came inside the pumpkin!" It still makes me smile that even seasoned cooks can forget this humble squash hides a second ingredient right inside.

How to roast your pumpkin seeds: rinse and dry the seeds, toss with a drizzle of oil and a sprinkle of salt, then roast at 325° until crisp.

From there, the flavor options multiply: smoky paprika, chili-lime, garlic-Parmesan, even truffle salt and Parmesan — the same indulgent combo Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, once mentioned for her popcorn. Suddenly, pumpkin seeds go from humble garnish to chic nibble.

No matter how you season them, pumpkin seeds prove that nothing from this bright orange squash needs to go to waste. They're flavor, nutrition and joy all in one! More proof that pumpkin is generous from flesh to shell to seed.

Serves 6 (18 pieces total)

- ½ C. honey
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 1 T. soy sauce
- 36 pieces of fresh sugar pumpkin, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 18, 4-inch bamboo cocktail skewers (appetizer size, thin)
- 9–12 slices of thick-sliced bacon, chilled, cut in half crosswise, extra fat trimmed from ends
- 18 sweet-pickled red pearl onions (recipe below)
- Black pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 350°. Mix the honey, mustard and soy sauce in a small bowl to form a glaze. Set aside.

Microwave the pumpkin cubes in a single layer on a shallow dish for 30 to 45 seconds, just to soften for easier handling.

While the pumpkin cools, gather the other ingredients in an assembly line for skewers: start with bacon and weave it between the pumpkin-onion-pumpkin. (Use kitchen poultry shears to trim excess from ends.)

Once the skewers are assembled, arrange on a baking sheet lined with a silpad or parchment paper. Season with black pepper and brush with honey glaze.

Bake about 40 minutes, turning halfway through for even browning. (They can also be cooked in batches in an air fryer.) Suggested dipping sauces are honey mustard, creamy horseradish or Thai peanut sauce.

Sweet Pickled Red Pearl Onions

- ¾ C. sugar
- ¾ C. red wine (or apple cider vinegar, but colors will fade a bit)
- ½ C. water
- 20–24 red pearl onions

Prepare the pearl onions: peel, trim roots but don't cut them off. Larger onions can be halved, root to tip, to hold together.

Prepare a clean, heatproof canning jar in the sink. Combine sugar, wine or vinegar, and water in a small saucepan, stirring over medium heat until the sugar dissolves. Then bring contents to a low boil.

Add the onions immediately, stir, allow to heat through (about 1 minute). Then turn off heat.

Pour hot onions and brine into the canning jar. Refrigerate 1 hour or overnight until they're cool enough to handle. (Brine can be reused for other purposes.)

Tres Leches Pumpkin Parfait

Here's a different take on a pumpkin dessert using the combination of pumpkin with coconut, common in southeast Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Tres leches cake is a Latin American dessert using sponge cake soaked in three milks and topped with whipped cream. I first made tres leches parfaits when volunteering for my daughter's Taco Tuesday — the teachers loved them as much as the kids!

Serves 6

- 1, 14-oz. can sweetened condensed milk
- 1, 12-oz. can evaporated milk
- 1½ C. unsweetened coconut milk, well stirred before measuring (Thai, if available)
- Optional: ¼ cup canned pumpkin, to mix into the milk mixture
- ½ loaf pumpkin bread (4 slices), cut into ½-inch cubes (recipe below)
- ¼ C. unsalted pumpkin seeds to layer and as garnish



Optional: ½ cup chopped walnuts, dates, golden raisins or fresh figs
Whipped cream for topping

In a very large bowl, mix the three milks, and optional pumpkin, together until fully smooth. Combined, the standard cans yield more milk mixture than the 2 to 2½ cups needed for making 6 servings. The remaining unuses milk mixture can be used in other recipes.

Arrange pumpkin cake cubes in individual glass cups. Sprinkle optional garnishes and pumpkin seeds for color and texture as desired.

Just before serving, pour generous ¼ cup of the milk mixture over each portion. Top with whipped cream and pumpkin seeds.

Easy-Cube Pumpkin Bread

Adapted from the Joy of Cooking Quick Pumpkin Bread recipe, this version omits the chopped nuts, raisins and dates for cleaner cutting into the cubes for making a tres leches pumpkin parfait. Those ingredients add great texture used as garnish in the parfait recipe. Many commercially prepared pumpkin breads are now more pumpkin spice than pumpkin, but this is the classic and works better for this dessert.

Serves 6

- 1¾ C. all-purpose flour, sifted
- ¼ tsp. baking powder
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 1 tsp. salt
- ½ tsp. cinnamon

- ¼ tsp. ground cloves
- 1⅓ C. sugar
- ⅓ C. butter, softened
- 2 eggs
- 1 C. cooked and mashed pumpkin, or canned
- ⅓ C. water or milk
- ½ tsp. vanilla

Preheat the oven to 350°. Sift first six dry ingredients together. In a large bowl, cream the butter, sugar and eggs until light and fluffy. Then add in pumpkin. Fully beat in until smooth. Add in the dry sifted ingredients in thirds, alternating with liquids (milk/water and vanilla). Do not overbeat between each addition. Pour into a well-greased 9x5-inch loaf pan and bake for about 1 hour, until bread tests done with a toothpick. Allow to cool for cutting. ♦

Liz Tarditi is a chef and wine specialist with more than 30 years of experience in food, wine and event planning. She holds degrees from Villanova University and from a Seattle culinary arts program founded by a Certified French Master Chef, where she trained in a classic brigade-style kitchen. Liz later ran her own catering company and has worked as a wine specialist in Pennsylvania. She brings her training and life-long passion for seasonal, approachable cooking to Brandywine Table.

