

Pumpkin or Squash?

By Carol Barany

The Barany family's Breakfast of Champions is warmed-up leftover pie. On this Sunday morning after Thanksgiving, is anyone else browsing through the Herald-Republic, pairing their coffee with a big slice of the last of the squash pie?

That's right. Libby produces 85% of America's canned pumpkin, and they make it from Dickinson squash. To prepare enough filling to make 90 million pies every year, harvest on their farms in Morton, Illinois begins as early as August.

The label on the Libby's can reads that what's inside is 100 % pumpkin, and that's true. Legally, any hard-skinned squash can be called a pumpkin. There isn't a botanical distinction to differentiate these two members of Curcubitaceae family.

According to both the United States Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration, canned 'pumpkin' is "prepared from clean, sound, properly matured, golden-fleshed, firm-shelled, sweet varieties of either squashes or pumpkins." Since neither agency makes a distinction between pumpkins and their squash relatives, food processors can label their products as they choose.

Long before the arrival of humans in the Americas, researchers speculate that wild pumpkins thrived, looking less like large melons and more like small, hard balls with a very bitter taste.

30,000 years ago, the continent was home to giant herbivores, including mastodons, ground sloths, and gomphotheres. We know these mammals fed on the wild pumpkins since they left the evidence in their dung for archeologists to discover.

Archaeologists found 7,500 year old domesticated pumpkin seeds in the Oaxaca highlands of Mexico. When the new human inhabitants arrived, they likely took to eating the less bitter pumpkin varieties. Unwittingly, they initiated the long process of hybridization to the types we know today.

That process continued when the 'Dickinson' variety was especially developed for Libby's. Born from a cross between a butternut squash and a pumpkin, Dickinsons are long and tan in color. They don't look much like the orange Jack -O-Lanterns we associate with pumpkin pie.

Libby's uses Dickinsons because like our early ancestors, today's consumers agree that some curcubits taste better than others. Dickinsons have a better flavor and creamier texture than other squash or pumpkins. If you've ever made pumpkin puree from a leftover Halloween Jack-O-Lantern, you know that the meat can be watery and stringy, not very sweet, and less vibrant in color than Libby's product.

If you prefer to make your own filling, the Dickinson squash's closest relative is butternut squash. You can't buy Libby's squash at the grocery store. It's proprietary.

As long as we're fact checking, what about those Candied Yams we're reheating for dinner tonight? Chances are they aren't yams at all.

What most of us call a yam is actually a sweet potato. Although they share some similarities, the true yam and sweet potato are not botanically related. Sweet potatoes (*Ipomoea batatas*) belong to the morning glory family (*Convolvulaceae*) while yams belong to the *Dioscoreaceae* family. What's more, the edible parts of sweet potatoes are the roots. We eat the yam's tubers.

Neither is related to the potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*) we typically eat as fries or hash browns.

Sweet potatoes were grown in Peru as early as 750 BC. Native Americans were growing sweet potatoes when Columbus arrived in 1492, and George Washington grew them on his Virginia farm.

95% of yams are grown in Africa. The word 'yam' is derived from "nyam", "nyami", or "nyambi", verbs from African dialects meaning "to taste" or "to eat." It's likely that enslaved Africans applied these terms to the sweet potatoes available in America, which took the place of the staple root vegetable grown in West Africa.

In the United States, you might find yams at ethnic markets. Compared to sweet potatoes, yams are starchier and drier, and not very sweet. They have a more cylindrical shape with skin that's rough and almost bark-like. Most yams have white flesh, although some red, yellow, and purple cultivars exist. Their taste and texture is similar to white russet potatoes, but with more fiber and complex carbohydrates. Yams can be the size of a small potato, or a behemoth more than five feet long weighing over 100 pounds.

Compared to yams, sweet potatoes are shorter, with a plump mid-section tapering at both ends to a point. They come in several varieties with orange, purple, or even white flesh.

The USDA requires that when the term 'yam' is used to describe sweet potatoes, it must also be labeled as a 'sweet potato'. Unless you specifically shopped for yams, you're almost certainly reheating Candied Sweet Potatoes tonight.