

Beyond pie-filling: Sweet or savory, pumpkin is a versatile ingredient

By **Don Cazentre / The Post-Standard** October 27, 2009

The only time you'll find a traditional pumpkin pie on the menu at the **Inn of the Seasons** in Onondaga is during Thanksgiving weekend.

That doesn't mean owners and chefs Brad Wiese and Carole Marino-Wiese haven't thought of other things to do with pumpkin. You might find it in dishes at their restaurant in a few surprising ways, especially in the fall.

The Post-Standard recently asked them to come up with some pumpkin-based alternatives to pie. They responded with salad, soup, two entrees and three desserts (none of them pie).

"Pumpkin has been pigeon-holed," Brad Wiese said. "It's not just for pie, or even just for desserts."

At the Inn of the Seasons, 4311 W. Seneca Turnpike, Carole Marino-Wiese is the pastry chef, while her husband handles the rest of the cooking duties.

As they talked about cooking with pumpkin, a clear difference in approach emerged: Marino-Wiese uses canned pumpkin puree in her baked goods. Wiese uses only fresh pumpkin in his savory dishes.

"For desserts, the canned pumpkin gives better texture and consistency," Marino-Wiese said.

The canned pumpkin also has a more concentrated flavor, because the commercial producers can strain more water out of the pumpkin meat than a home or restaurant cook can. (Pumpkin is 90 percent water).

"If I used fresh pumpkin in a creme caramel or torte, people would say, 'There's no pumpkin in here,'" Marino-Wiese said. "It needs that stronger concentrated flavor."

Marino-Wiese has three pumpkin-based desserts that rotate on her menu from late September through the end of the holidays: Pumpkin Creme Caramel, Frozen Pumpkin Toffee Mousse Torte and Pumpkin Bourbon Cheesecake.

Brad Wiese prefers using the fresh pumpkin for soups and other savory dishes. For this story, he prepared Pumpkin Soup with chevril pistou; Autumn Salad with pumpkin croutons; Pumpkin Ravioli with balsamic brown butter sauce and fresh sage; Pan-seared Halibut on a bed of sweet and sour pumpkin; and Pumpkin Risotto.

For the soup and risotto, he takes sugar or pie pumpkins (available at local grocers) and splits them, scoops out the seeds and membranes, and carefully shaves off the skin with a sharp knife. Then he cuts the pumpkin meat into the size he wants. (For the ravioli, he roasted the pumpkin and pureed the meat).

If that sounds like something you'd do with squash, there's a reason: Pumpkin is related to squash. (And like other squash, it's a fruit, not a vegetable).

"Anything I can do with butternut or acorn squash," Wiese said, "I can do with pumpkin."

His recipe for a butternut squash soup, for example, is similar to that for his pumpkin soup.

One difference is that he generally adds more seasoning to the pumpkin.

"Pumpkin has a mild flavor, milder than some of the other squash," he said. "So it needs a little more salt and pepper and brown sugar."

Marino-Wiese also finds it necessary to boost the mild pumpkin flavor. In addition to spices traditionally associated with pumpkin pie, like nutmeg or cinnamon, she adds a little more salt.

"Salt is always important in baking," she said. "In the pumpkin desserts, salt adds some pop to the flavor."