

Cooking Green:

Tofu and Tempeh Outstanding Meat Alternatives

by Kay Bushnell

Not long ago many Americans were unfamiliar with tofu. Today, with high consumer demand, tofu and other soy foods are available in most mainstream markets. Many families are featuring tofu and tempeh frequently in their daily meals.

Tofu has come a long way in the western world since 1770, when Benjamin Franklin was in London and came into the possession of some soybeans, which he sent to John Bartram in Philadelphia. Franklin said that the "cheese made of them in China...so excited [his] curiosity" that he learned how it was made, "when the [soy]meal is turned into curds". The earliest tofu company in the United States, Wo Sing & Co. of San Francisco, was in business as early as 1878, according to William Shurtleff of the Soy Foods Center in Lafayette, CA (925) 283-2991. Shurtleff has coauthored several books on tofu and other soy foods and has created SoyaScan, the world's most comprehensive computerized database on soybeans and soyfoods, with records from 1100 B.C.

The attraction of soy foods today is fueled by medical research that confirms the health benefits of soy foods, including reduced risk of heart disease and certain cancers. Soybeans are excellent sources of protein. Tofu made with calcium sulfate (check the label) is a good source of calcium. All soy foods are free of cholesterol.

Tofu is the result of a process that begins with washing soybeans. Then the beans are soaked, ground, and boiled with water into a soy milk that is strained and curdled using a process similar to cheese-making. Finally, the curds are separated from the watery soy whey and are pressed into the familiar ivory-colored blocks found in retail stores. If you use only part of your tofu block, place the remainder in a container and cover it with water. Change the water every few days to keep it fresh for up to a week.

Tempeh is a traditional Indonesian food that consists of cultured and fermented whole, cooked soybeans combined with a grain and pressed into cakes. It is high in protein and fiber. Tempeh should be cooked before it is eaten.

Both tofu and tempeh can be crumbled with seasonings into spreads or formed into patties and baked or grilled with marinades. Tofu tastes bland until it is combined with sauces and seasonings. It absorbs the flavors of the foods and spices with which it is cooked, making it one of the most versatile foods. Tempeh has a stronger flavor than tofu and is delicious in stirfries, baked, broiled, grilled, or combined with other foods.

The following recipe for Tofu-Tempeh "Turkey" Breasts will appeal to those who insist on great taste. Serve the patties with mashed potatoes, dressing, sage gravy, cranberry sauce and seasonal vegetable dishes for a truly delicious feast.