

# Curious about Cashews?

By Kay Bushnell

One of the rewards for changing to a totally plant-based diet is discovering new ways to enjoy many familiar foods. Take cashews, for example. I used to think of them as just one of the mixed nuts typically served at social events. They were also a tasty snack to be eaten out of hand or perhaps in a salad or entrée at Asian or Indian restaurants.

Before I switched to 100% plant based meals, I never imagined that I'd be using cashews to make a whipped cream-like topping for desserts, delicious creamy lasagna filling, and rich-tasting sauces for pasta, rice, and potatoes. Cashews' mild flavor and mellow consistency when blended make them ideal for desserts and sauces. Cashew butter, either natural or sweetened, is great on bagels. You can buy cashew butter already made or make your own by blending cashews in a little canola or olive oil until the "butter" is very smooth. If you want it to be sweet, add a little rice syrup or maple syrup to the pureed cashews. Be sure to refrigerate cashew butter to keep it fresh.

A fairly large portion of cashews' calories is fat, but most of it is "good" monounsaturated fat. Cashews are rich in magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, and folacin. Like all nuts, they are cholesterol-free.

The Portuguese took cashews, originally native to Brazil, to India, where hundreds of thousands of growers produce crops of cashews. In recent years intensive production of cashews in Viet Nam has nearly exceeded production in India. In Brazil many cashews are still collected in the wild. The cashew nut, which looks like a cross between a bean and a parrot's beak, grows in an unusual way, hanging below an apple-like fruit, which falls to the ground when the fruit and nut are ripe. The bitter, fragile fruits must be used within 24 hours of ripening.

The nuts are collected after the fruit falls to the ground to prevent disturbing the other ripening cashew fruits. An irritating poison in their shells is neutralized through roasting or extraction with an oil solvent. Then the nuts are dried in the sun, and one by one the shells are opened. The intensive labor required to produce cashews makes them one of the more expensive nuts. The caustic oils that are removed from the nutshells are used in paints, varnishes, brake linings, and clutches.

The following recipe for this special lasagna is earth-friendly (no meat or dairy.) Tasters have commented that it is much more satisfying than lasagnas that are heavy with meat and cheese. Cashews are the secret to its wonderful, rich flavor and texture.