

## **A New Look at an Old Nut**

### **Meat and Milk from Almonds**

By Kay Bushnell

There is evidence that almonds have been consumed by humans for as long as fifteen thousand years. They are thought to have originated in central Asia and traveled through trade to the Mediterranean area. They are the nuts that are mentioned most frequently in the Old Testament. Archaeologists discovered almonds among other nuts in the kitchen baskets of homes near Mt. Vesuvius, preserved under ash after the volcano erupted in 79 A.D.

Europeans brought almonds to California in the 1700s. The northern part of California's central valley proved to be an ideal growing region. One of the most beautiful sights in California's Central Valley is an orchard of almond trees in flower, and where there are almond trees there are usually bees. If it's not too windy and the temperature is right, these industrious insects perform necessary cross-pollination among the blossoms. Some almond trees produce bitter nuts. Their oil is processed for cosmetics and flavoring. Other trees produce the familiar sweet almonds that we use in cooking.

Today's cooks use almonds in ways that are almost identical to their culinary use throughout history. We chop them, slice them, crush them, pulverize them into a paste, and make almond "milk" by grinding them with water and straining the white liquid that results.

Plant-based meals can be made tastier and more nutritious by adding a little ground almond meal to baked goods and vegetable loaves or by stirring almond butter into soups and stews. It's easy to make your own trail mix with almonds, other nuts, and dried fruits. A combination of almond butter with jelly or sliced banana makes a delicious and satisfying sandwich. Both almonds and cashews make a delectable, cholesterol-free dessert topping. In *Sweet and Natural* by Meredith McCarty you'll find a recipe for Almond Cream to top your cakes and pies.

Avoid almonds (or other nuts) that are roasted in oil and salted. They can easily become rancid. Use raw, unsalted, shelled almonds and keep them frozen or refrigerated until you use them. If you want to deepen their flavor, roast them yourself by placing them on a pan or cookie sheet in a 300° oven for about 15-20 minutes. By keeping the oven temperature at 300° you will preserve the heat-sensitive oils. Store both raw and roasted shelled almonds in a tightly closed container in the freezer.

The *Harvard Heart Letter* describes nuts as "tasty and available" and says that "...they can be incorporated into any diet." Sixteen to twenty percent of the calories in almonds consist of protein in a balanced distribution of amino acids. In addition, vitamin E, zinc, iron, calcium, selenium, and fat (mostly monounsaturated) are also packed into each almond kernel. A number of studies have shown that consuming almonds can reduce cholesterol levels, especially when the diet as a whole is plant-based.

Almond milk, a blend of whole almonds and water, is a refreshing alternative to cow's milk and can substitute for it in most recipes. Some markets carry almond milk in aseptic cartons, or you can easily make your own. In a blender finely grind 1/2 cup raw almonds for about one minute. Then gradually add 1-1/2 cups water and blend thoroughly. Strain the milk through two layers of cheesecloth or a clean, never-used painter's strainer. Flavor the milk with a few drops of vanilla and almond extract and a teaspoon of maple syrup. Almond milk will keep in the refrigerator for up to a week. The leftover almond bits can be used in cookies, muffins, toppings, or meatless "meat" loaves.

When we enrich our plant-based meals with almonds or other nuts and eat less meat, eggs, and dairy products we greatly benefit the earth and our own health.