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Soy Good for You

By *Kay Daly*

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We look to the East for so much: spiritual guidance from Buddhism and Taoism; tasty take-out treats; hybrid gas-electric cars; high-performance consumer electronics.

But when it comes to the greatest dietary import from the East, you really can't beat the soybean. According to the United Soybean Board (www.talksoy.com), it's been a staple in the Chinese diet for more than 5,000 years, as well as a key crop in American agriculture. In fact, our little green friends have been grown in the U.S. since 1829. In the nineteenth century, they were used as makeshift coffee beans by Civil War soldiers and as cattle feed by farmers in our nation's heartland.

It took George Washington Carver, peanut researcher extraordinaire, to plumb the depths of this noble bean. He demonstrated the riches of protein and oil contained therein, and by the middle of the last century, the U.S. became a major exporter of soybeans to countries around the globe.

Since then, scientists have uncovered another soy perk: the little green bean offers numerous health benefits. High in fiber and low in fat, soy is a very efficient and healthful supplier of protein, without all the nasty side effects of meat consumption such as, oh, heart attacks. What's more, some studies suggest that soy consumption actually reduces cholesterol. A 1999 study found that consumers who replaced some of the burgers, chickens, and other furry and feathered proteins they usually ate with soy-based protein saw a decrease in overall and LDL cholesterol (i.e., "bad" cholesterol) levels. Soy also appears to increase the level of HDL cholesterol (the "good" kind). The result: The FDA has approved the use of food labels that claim that soy foods reduce the risk of heart disease.

Soy has been linked to a variety of other health benefits as well, due to its high levels of isoflavones, or plant estrogen. No one knows for sure, but some claim that the isoflavones in soy help fight breast and prostate cancer, osteoporosis, and some symptoms of menopause, including hot flashes.

And yet, despite all the benefits of this humble bean, Americans have yet to catch soy fever. Why? We can only assume it's because they haven't been properly introduced. So, read on to learn more tasty ways to get a little soy in your life.

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The world of soy

Besides the easy-access, prefab soy products, such as soy burgers, soy ice cream, and soy cheese, there are a wide array of products that are just perfect for cooking. They can provide a welcome relief when you've had one Boca burger too many.

Soy beans

Yep, you can eat 'em straight. Soybeans make for a delightfully munchable snack, bursting to the brim with fiber and protein. Buy them dried and salted at your local health food store as "soy nuts," a tasty lower-fat alternative to peanuts. Or make like the Japanese and serve boiled beans as a side dish or appetizer. Boiled soybeans are vaguely reminiscent of the more familiar (and often decried) lima bean, but soy has a much firmer texture. Served whole in the pod at Japanese restaurants, they appear under the name "edamame" (the Japanese term for soy bean), and they're temptingly addictive.

Soy milk

Processed from soybeans that are soaked, ground, and strained, soy milk makes a great substitute for the old dairy standby, milk. Its texture and viscosity mimics regular milk, and because it contains no lactose or casein (a milk derivative), it's safe for anyone who can't tolerate dairy products because of lactose intolerance, food allergies, or Irritable Bowel Syndrome.

Like cow's milk, you can find soy milk in a number of varieties, including regular, low-fat, and chocolate- and vanilla-flavored "drinks." The flavored varieties are more palatable for drinking straight, and vanilla-flavored is good for pouring over your morning cereal. Brands vary in terms of flavor, color, and texture, so shop around until you find one you like.

As an extra-special added bonus, soy milk has a much longer shelf life than dairy milk. Some brands are sold in aseptic containers (i.e., no refrigeration needed) that can live in your pantry for months until opened. Once opened, you'll need to store it in the fridge, but even then, the shelf life is much longer than the measly few weeks you get with cow juice.

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Tofu

Tofu, or pressed soybean curd, gets a bad rap from non-believers. "It's so bland!" they cry. "It tastes like nothing!"

That, my dear friends, is precisely the point. Tofu tastes like nothing, so it can be induced into tasting like anything. It's one of the most amazingly versatile and moldable foods ever invented. Stick it in your favorite marinade and you'll soon understand the value of these little edible sponges.

And as much as tofu plays the role of kitchen chameleon in terms of flavor, its texture is another element of its versatility that is not to be overlooked. In fact, even before you take it home from the store, tofu offers a variety of textural options. If you want a good substitute for sour cream or yogurt, select **silken tofu**. With its high water content and creamy feel, silken tofu easily whips up in the blender as a base for salad dressings and smoothies. Go with **firm** or **extra-firm tofu**, and you'll get a denser, sliceable curd that can stand up to stir-frying, pan frying, and grilling.

Once you've chosen your style, you can still morph the tofu texture. Freeze and thaw it and you'll get a coarser, denser version that can be crumbled into chili. And to make your firm tofu even firmer, and thus, a better sop for marinade, you'll want to press it. Place your block of firm or extra firm tofu on a large plate, cover it with another plate, and weigh the top plate down with a large can or jar (a pasta sauce jar works nicely). Press for 30 minutes, pour off the water that's drained out, and your tofu is ready to use.

And if you don't feel like going through all that fuss, you can also purchase pre-marinated and even pre-seasoned and baked tofu at specialty gourmet and health food stores.

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Tempeh

On first sight, tempeh is easily the scariest of the soy foods. Its lumpy, bumpy, and an unappealing shade of beige-y gray. You can't be blamed for not wanting to put such an object in your mouth.

If you do, though, your bravery will be rewarded. Tempeh is a tasty, hearty, and (yes!) versatile food that can nicely round out a meat-free or meat-scant diet.

Essentially, tempeh consists of fermented soy beans tightly packed into firm cakes. It can be made solely of soybeans or mixed with grains, and it's a staple food item in Indonesia . It has a tougher, nutty taste and texture. Most recipes suggest that you steam cubes of tempeh before preparing, which helps to tenderize it, though if you're frying it, you can skip this step.

As for its much lauded versatility, tempeh can be sliced and sauteed, fried, or grilled. It can be crumbled and added to chili. Cubes of it can be simmered in stew, or it can be grated and mixed with other seasonings to make sandwich fillings.

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Quick soy cookery

Now that you know the lay of the soy landscape, how about putting all this knowledge to work? Read on for some quick and easy ways to make magic in your kitchen with our little green buddy.

Banana Soy Oatmeal

Increase the nutritional octane in your morning bowl of mush by substituting soy milk for your daily dairy.

What you'll need:

- A heavy saucepan
- 1 cup soy milk
- Cinnamon
- Salt
- 1/2 cup oatmeal (not the "quick cooking" variety)
- 1 banana
- Brown sugar

1. Pour the soy milk in a heavy saucepan and sprinkle with a dash of cinnamon and salt.
2. Heat the soy milk over a medium-high flame. When it begins to boil, stir in the oatmeal and set your timer for 5 minutes. Adjust heat if the oatmeal threatens to boil over.
3. As the oatmeal boils, add the banana, sliced. Stir occasionally until the 5 minutes are up.
4. Pour oatmeal into a serving bowl. Add brown sugar to taste. (Remember that the bananas already add sweetness. Even as little as 1/2 teaspoon of sugar can be enough.)

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Edamame for Snacking

You can usually find frozen soybeans (edamame) at the grocery store. If your local megalomart doesn't carry them: (1) complain loudly and bitterly; (2) visit your local Asian food store.

What you'll need:

Large saucepan or cooking pot
Water
Frozen edamame
Salt

1. Boil about 2 quarts of water in a large pot.
2. Add the desired amount of edamame (for one person, 1/2 cup to 1 cup should be sufficient as a snack or side dish).
3. Bring the water back to a boil and cook the beans for 5 minutes.
4. If you're serving them as a side dish, drain and sprinkle with salt.
5. If you're snacking on them, drain, rinse with cold water, and sprinkle with salt. Who needs popcorn?

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Fried Tofu

When extra-firm tofu is fried, its texture turns slightly creamy, which contrasts with the crispy, savory cornstarch coating. Simply heavenly.

What you'll need:

Large skillet
 Square glass baking dish (9-inch square)
 1 14-oz. package of extra-firm tofu
 Canola oil
 1/4 cup soy sauce
 1/8 cup mirin (can be found in the Asian food aisle)
 1/4 cup rice vinegar
 1 teaspoon sugar
 Garlic powder, to taste
 Canola oil
 Cornstarch

1. Press the tofu: place it on a large plate, cover with a second plate, and weigh the top plate down with a large can or jar (a pasta sauce jar works well). Leave for 30 minutes, until water has pressed out of the tofu.
2. Slice the tofu into 8 slices. This is easiest if you start by slicing the entire cake in half and then successively slicing the remaining pieces in half until you have 8 slices, each about 1/4 inch thick.
3. Line the bottom of the 9-inch square baking dish with tofu slices (they should fit nicely).
4. In a medium mixing bowl, stir together the soy sauce, mirin, rice vinegar, sugar, and garlic powder.
5. Pour the soy sauce mixture over the tofu slices. Let sit for 30 minutes. Flip the tofu slices, and let them sit for another 30 minutes.
6. Pull the tofu out of the marinade and dry lightly with paper towels.
7. Begin heating oil in your skillet until very hot.
8. Dredge the tofu slices in cornstarch and lay the slices in the hot oil. Fry until brown, flip, and brown on the other side.
9. Remove from the pan and drain on paper towels.
10. Serve with soy sauce.

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Tempeh and Peppers

For this recipe, you can steam the tempeh in advance (for 15 minutes) or prepare without steaming. Serve with white rice for a heartier meal.

What you'll need:

Large skillet
4 teaspoons canola oil
Garlic powder, to taste
1/2 cup sliced onion
1 red bell pepper, sliced
8 ounces tempeh, cut into 1/2 inch cubes
1/4 teaspoon ground fennel
Salt and pepper, to taste

1. Heat canola oil in a large skillet. Add the onions and garlic powder. Saute until the onions are soft.
2. Add the pepper slices, and saute for 2 more minutes.
3. Add the tempeh, fennel, salt, and pepper. Stir and saute until the tempeh is golden.

Just can't get enough? For more recipes, visit:

Soy Food Kitchen
The U.S. Soyfoods Directory

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