

LENTILS: A PULSATING HISTORY

Often overlooked and much maligned, it's time to consider the healthy lentil once again

By Dean Rocker

Ask the average man or woman in the street for their opinion about, or knowledge of, the lentil and it's a certainty that you will be greeted with incredulous looks and probably asked in a mocking tone if you are serious. Following this initial period of mirth and puzzlement you would be very likely to receive one of the following two responses. Some respondents would make reference to the smooth and lightly spiced side dish, Tarka Dahl, which can be ordered in Indian restaurants. This innocuous and simple dish accompanies many a weekend feast of curry and rice up and down the length and breadth of the nation. For the others, the mention of lentils would predictably conjure up a rather passé image of hippie vegetarians eating a pallid and flavourless slop.

Lentils have been the butt of many a joke. To those of you who are familiar with the cult BBC comedy series from the 1980s, *The Young Ones*, this scenario will bring back fond memories. In this much loved show the hippie character Neil, played by Nigel Planer, was often heard to declare to his impoverished fellow student housemates that it was lentils for tea again. This announcement was always met with groans of derision as he timidly stirred a large saucepan full of an unappetising and greyish gloop.

There is, however, much more to the lentil, or *Lens culinaris esculenta*, as it is botanically known. It's doubtful whether any of us would be here today but for the humble lentil, as it is one of the oldest cultivated crops known to mankind and has been sustaining us for thousands of years.

Lentils that have been found in the historic layers at the Franchthi Cave Complex in Greece by archaeologists, have been successfully dated back to the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic era, between 13,000 and 9,500 years ago. Other important finds in Syria date to the end of the Mesolithic period, and in the Jericho area of Palestine evidence of lentils can be dated to about 8,000 B.C. It's not surprising that lentils are found at archaeological sites throughout the Middle and Near East, as they were an important crop in ancient times. One of several plants, along with wheat, barley, pea and flax, which are always associated with the Old World agricultural revolution that took place in prehistoric times. Lentils spread to south-eastern Europe during the Neolithic period, eventually reaching the Mediterranean area during the Bronze Age.

Lentils were important to the Jews. We know this from the story of Esau, a man who gave up his birthright for a dish of lentils (Genesis 25 30-34).

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The ancient Greeks enjoyed lentils in soups, and they were conscious of the health benefits that lentils were known to bring. Rather snobbishly they would never serve such modest fare to their guests, however. The Romans also mentioned lentils in their writings, but lentils were usually seen as a dish for people at the bottom end of the social scale.

This trend of looking down on lentils continued throughout the centuries until the eighteenth century when they enjoyed a brief period of acclaim. Indeed Marie, the wife of King Louis XV of France, made them so vogueish that they were referred to as "lentils of the queen". Throughout the nineteenth century they were again regarded as food for peasants, being termed "the poor man's meat". The only time this vilified nourishment seemed to gain any endorsement was during Lent. They were used as a replacement food for those members of the Catholic congregation who found fish to be unaffordable.

All in all, it's right to say that the lentil has had a rough time of it and has subsequently fallen out of favour. It would probably be safe to say that the majority of people in modern day Britain wouldn't know how to cook them or what they actually taste like; probably not even wanting to find out, sadly. Lentils are not very popular in the developed world at all, but to millions of hungry people across the Middle East, and in India, they make up a very important part of their daily diet. Extremely high proportions of the people in these countries are vegetarians, the others who are not; have little or no access to meat and even if they did they probably would not be able to afford it.

With the history lesson over, it's time to closely examine the health benefits that lentils can bring to us all. "Lentils are a nutritionally powerful member of the legume family which can be great for your health," said Jane Ashton, BA DipION, and member of the British Association of Nutritional Therapists. "Their high fibre content (just one cup of cooked lentils can give you 62.6% of your daily fibre value) can help lower cholesterol levels and prevent constipation as well as improve digestive disorders such as irritable bowel and diverticulitis."

The health benefits associated with fibre don't stop there, however. "Fibre can also help to stabilise blood sugar levels. Those who eat high sugar foods, refined carbohydrates as well as tea, coffee or alcohol are often prone to blood sugar imbalances. This can lead to hypoglycaemia, insulin resistance and diabetes. The fibre in lentils is excellent for helping control these blood sugar swings," said Ashton.

With today's fast-paced and stressful lifestyles, one of the biggest health concerns is to try and maintain a healthy heart. "Lentils are good for your heart. As well as helping to lower cholesterol they contain significant amounts of folate and magnesium. Folate can help to lower homocysteine, another risk factor (like cholesterol) for cardiovascular disease, and magnesium can help to relax arteries and veins, allowing better blood flow and the supply of oxygen and nutrients to cells. As well as folate, lentils contain another B vitamin, thiamine (B1). Lack of thiamine is associated with fatigue, depression, constipation and a pins and needles type sensation," Ashton added.

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People assume, in their ignorance, that unless they eat red meat they will not get the necessary iron in their diet. "Lentils are rich in iron, which is an integral component of haemoglobin and a part of the body's enzymes systems for energy production and metabolism. Menstruating women, children and adolescents can all be at risk of low iron levels," Ashton countered.

Another popular misconception is that only meat and fish can provide the levels of protein that we all require to sustain our health. That's an additional myth that Ashton goes on to decry. "If you eat your lentils together with brown rice or other whole grains you will be eating a first class protein on a par with meat or fish. Lentils and rice contain all eight essential amino acids (the building blocks of protein), which the adult body needs for growth and repair. They make a good replacement for red meat which, unlike the lentil, is high in saturated fat."

To sum up this important nutritional message Ashton finally declared, "Altogether lentils are a great addition to your diet. They are a low fat food, good for your heart, digestion and energy levels."

So next time you are out food shopping, do something thing different. Be courageous, and place a packet of this time-honoured legume in your trolley or basket. Amazingly healthy, delicious, simple to cook and inexpensive. It's clear that it really is time to take the lentil seriously.