

Diet and diabetes go hand-in-hand

By Alice Park, Time

It's not that doctors don't know how to treat diabetes; the right diet and medications to control blood sugar can certainly keep the severest symptoms under control. But regular blood checks are challenging, and watching what you eat is even harder. The latest research, however, provides hope for helping people on the verge of developing Type 2 diabetes stick with a low-fat, low-calorie diet that may prevent the disease.

A decade ago, scientists showed that prediabetics who changed their diet and exercised regularly lowered their risk of the disease by 58 percent, a greater benefit than from medications designed to keep blood-glucose levels in check. But that study involved intensive one-on-one sessions in a lab setting—not a practical solution for the 79 million people in the U.S. who are currently the most vulnerable to developing the disease.

So the new trial focused more on the ways people diet in the real world. Prediabetic volunteers took part in group sessions to learn about healthy diet and exercise habits or educated themselves about those strategies using a DVD as well as e-mail and online counseling. Both groups lost more weight and controlled their prediabetes better than those who were provided with the standard diabetes care (basically medication and doctor weigh-ins). Those taking part in the group sessions lost an average of 14 pounds, and the self-trainers shed 10 pounds, compared with 5 pounds lost by the control group.

Such low-resource techniques could become critical to fighting the rising toll of diabetes, which affects 8 percent of the U.S. population, says the study's lead author, Dr. Jun Ma of

the Palo Alto Medical Foundation Research Institute.”We know there are huge numbers of patients out there who need intervention. We just don’t have the manpower and resources to deliver them.”

The findings should help simple tools such as the DVDs and online resources become more widespread and reach more patients before they reach the tipping point, when they fall ill for real. What’s more, self-taught good habits can often be longer-lasting than those hammered into you by a well-meaning doctor.

Sapporo Breweries study finds beer may have anti-virus properties

By Huffington Post

Does beer have anti-virus powers? According to a new study funded by Japanese beer company Sapporo Breweries, a “key ingredient” found in the world’s most popular alcoholic beverage may very well help stave off winter sniffles.

Researchers at Sapporo Medical University found that humulone, a chemical compound in hops, was effective against the respiratory syncytial (RS) virus, AFP reports. In addition, humulone was also found to have an anti-inflammatory effect, according to Sapporo’s news release.

“The RS virus can cause serious pneumonia and breathing difficulties for infants and toddlers, but no vaccination is

available at the moment to contain it," Jun Fuchimoto, a researcher from the beer company, told AFP. The RS virus, which is said to be particularly prevalent in the winter months, can also cause symptoms similar to that of the common cold in adults.

But before you reach for that bottle of your favorite brew, harboring dreams of winter-illness domination, be warned: Since only small quantities of humulone can be found in beer, researchers say a person would have to drink about 30 12 oz. cans of the alcoholic drink to benefit from the anti-virus effect, AFP notes.

Japan's Kyoto Shimbun News reports that Sapporo Breweries now hopes to create humulone-containing food and (non-alcoholic) beverages that both adults and children can consume.

This is not the first time in recent months that beer has been touted for its "healthful properties" by people in the industry.

In November, Alexis Nasard, Heineken's chief commercial officer, announced that beer was not only natural but "healthy." In an interview with CNBC, Nasard also said that beer has fewer calories than a lot of things, including a glass of milk.

However, while experts agree that beer may be beneficial for some people when consumed in moderation, guzzling too much of the brew can also result in heartburn, weight gain, dehydration and a slew of other physical and social hazards that can be caused by drinking too much alcohol.

Changing chip ingredients doesn't make them a health food

By Susan Carpenter, Los Angeles Times

Move over, potato and corn chips. There's a cornucopia of other vegetables making its way to the grocery store snack aisle.

Whether it's black bean chips or dehydrated cabbage, sprouted sweet potato tortilla crisps or baked and salted peas, the options in the \$560-billion global snack food market are expanding along with the waistlines of Americans and their desire to eat more healthfully.

"For me, it's about eating smart but not giving up things that taste good," said Doug Foreman, founder of Beanitos, in Austin, Texas. Since launching its line of black bean chips in 2010, Beanitos has become the fastest-growing natural snack chip on the market, according to Spins, a natural product research firm.

Although chips made from corn or potatoes are increasingly available in varieties with less fat or salt, snack chips made from beans and other legumes, such as lentils and peas, can be higher in fiber, which leaves snackers feeling fuller with fewer calories. They are, however, still snack chips.

"Even snacks claiming they're better for you are still an indulgent item. You're still getting sodium and fat," said Todd Kluger, vice president of marketing for Lundberg Farms in Richvale. Lundberg Farms makes gluten-free chips from whole-grain, organic rice that is not genetically modified. Even so, Kluger said, "we don't claim a health benefit from an indulgent snack. We recognize it's part of a healthy balanced

diet.”

So do most Americans. According to the 2012 consumer snacking study from the Symphony Group, 46 percent of consumers view snacks as part of a healthful eating plan; 60 percent are seeking snacks that offer attributes beyond basic nutrition, such as organic or low-glycemic (which has less negative effect on blood sugar levels) or minimally processed ingredients.

“Calorically, our veggie chips do have fat and sugar. Fats from whole foods, such as soaked cashew nuts or sesame seeds, are in their natural state. The body is able to digest them more easily,” said Penny Ann Horowitz, founder of Alive & Radiant Foods in Berkeley, which makes chips from dehydrated organic kale, arugula, sweet onion, collard greens and other vegetables few people typically associate with snack foods. They are, surprisingly, delicious.

Like any snack, vegetable-based chips “have to taste good first,” said Steve Kneepkens, vice president of sales and marketing for Calbee, in Fairfield, Calif. The maker of Snapea Crisps is about to expand from its popular baked pea snacks into salty crisps made from lentils. “The sweet potatoes, the lentils, plantains and other vegetable snacks are growing in popularity because they offer different nutritional opportunities, and they taste good too.”

For many vegetable snack chip makers, it isn’t enough to merely make a tasty chip from something as unexpected as cassava root or collard greens. They also offer them in flavors appealing to consumers who like to experiment with a globe’s worth of tastes, such as Thai basil, teriyaki, wasabi, pico de gallo and cucumber and dill.

“Consumers are increasingly looking for more variety in all their products,” said Christopher Clark, spokesman for the Snack Food Assn. in Arlington, Va. “Years ago, you had

barbecue or sour cream and onion potato chips. Now you have everything from chipotle to beer battered and cheddar. There's a lot of opportunity to do interesting things with flavors and ingredients, which brings you to the vegetable and bean chips and rice-based snacks we're seeing today."

Though snacks perceived as more healthful are outpacing much of the market, different permutations of potato and tortilla chips are projected to grow even more quickly than the many types of vegetables that are now being fried, baked and dehydrated into salted snack chips, according to the Snack Food Assn. That's good news for consumers, who now have more snacking variety than ever in products that match their dietary values and health goals.

It's the memories about a meal that matter more

By Sarah Zielinski, NPR

It's no surprise that how much a person eats determines how full they feel right after a meal. But it's the memory of that meal, and not the meal itself, that matters a couple of hours later. So does this mean you trick yourself into thinness? Probably not. But it does tell us something about the role that manipulating memory may play in calorie intake.

We've known for a while that people who are distracted while eating – such as by watching TV or typing – are not really thinking about what they're eating. They're not making memories of the food, and may be setting themselves up for later hunger.

This area of research is helping scientists to better understand “how our memory for food comes to influence the decisions we make and the amount of food we eat,” says Jeffrey Brunstrom, an experimental psychologist at the University of Bristol in the U.K.

In a study published in the journal PLOS One, Brunstrom and his colleagues took a group of 100 people and, just before lunch, showed them a picture of a bowl of supermarket-brand creamed tomato soup. Half saw a bowl with 300 ml of soup, and half saw a bowl with 500 ml of soup. (This is about the difference between a cup and a bowl of soup.)

Each participant was then led into a cubicle where they ate some tomato soup – either the cup or bowl amount. But they couldn’t tell exactly how much soup they were eating because the scientists had employed a special system that could covertly add or remove soup from the bowl. The participants were just told to eat soup until they reached a special line on their bowl.

After lunch, people who ate more soup felt more satiated than those who ate less. But two and three hours later, it was the picture of the soup they saw earlier that mattered more. Those who had seen the bigger bowl of soup felt less hungry, whether or not they had eaten more soup.

At that point, Brunstrom says, “the memory was dominating hunger,” not the actual number of calories consumed.

What’s going on inside the brain and body isn’t completely clear at this point, but there are a lot of changes and feedbacks that take place when we eat food. “Memory for a recently consumed meal might give further refinement to those signals,” Brunstrom says.

Further evidence that memory matters for satiation comes from amnesiacs who suffer from a condition called hyperphagia, in which they cannot remember what they’ve eaten. In those

patients, Brunstrom says, “if they eat lots of meals, they tend to feel just bloated, but they don’t necessarily feel full. We think that they can’t actually attribute [the signals from their bodies] to what has taken place.”

This research may not yet provide any radical new strategies for weight loss, but, Brunstrom says, “one logical conclusion from this is that anything that we can do to promote the memory of a recent meal is a good thing.”

Last year, we brought you an intriguing example: Washington, D.C., chef Bryon Brown’s creative efforts to help people remember his meals by reinforcing the ingredients and flavors through acting, singing and music.

Brunstrom’s advice? Stop eating in front of the computer screen.

Sacramento making a name for itself in the world of caviar

By Debbie Arrington, Sacramento Bee

In its claim to farm-to-fork fame, Sacramento has another distinction to add to its credit: caviar capital of America.

Locals may not know that the Sacramento Valley has become home to the nation’s surging caviar industry, as California fish farmers capitalize on a shortage of wild caviar.

This holiday season, Sterling Caviar hopes its home base will discover its gourmet product, coveted by chefs and enjoyed by diners nationwide. It’s rolled out new labeling, a new website and a higher profile as another sustainable crop that’s

Sacramento grown.

“San Francisco, New York, Miami, that’s where we sell a lot of caviar,” said Enrique Castano, Sterling’s managing director. “Sacramento? Not so much. But we hope to change that.”

At its Elverta fish farm and processing center, Sterling recently hosted 16 Northern California chefs so they could learn firsthand about the pluses of local, sustainable caviar. In addition, Sterling produces an abundance of caviar’s byproduct: farmed sturgeon.

“Think global, act local,” said farm manager Peter Struffenegger. “We’re the leading U.S. producer of caviar. Internationally, we’re known as one of the best alternatives (to wild caviar). This is our identification, yet to most of Sacramento, we’re still a best-kept secret.”

Sterling caviar already is on the menu as an appetizer or an ingredient at Mulvaney’s B&L, Ella Dining Room and the Hyatt Regency in Sacramento. Thomas Keller’s famed restaurants – Bouchon Bistro and French Laundry in the Napa Valley and Per Se in New York – serve Sterling.

“Most people don’t even know where caviar comes from,” Castano said. “They say they tried it and it was too salty, fishy, yucky – but that wasn’t good caviar. We’re educating chefs and the public.”

High-quality caviar is not fishy or overtly salty. Instead, it has a buttery, almost nutty flavor that develops through aging.

Supplier to caviar giant Petrossian, Sterling now accounts for about 80 percent of the domestic caviar market. Its demand has skyrocketed following restrictions on imported wild caviar.

Those bans are intended to protect the dwindling wild sturgeon population. The best caviar comes from sturgeon, an ancient

fish that – like salmon – spawns in fresh water, and then travels out to sea.

Overfishing in the Caspian Sea pushed several species of sturgeon – including those that produce Russia's prized beluga caviar – to the brink of extinction. Since 2005, the U.S. has banned imports of wild beluga caviar.

California's own green sturgeon is endangered (and an illegal catch). Sport fishing of wild white sturgeon is allowed, but commercial fishing is prohibited.

Native to the Sacramento River, California white surgeon can be farmed successfully in fresh water and actually thrives in controlled conditions.

Farmed caviar has made the delicacy more available and sustainable, a plus for consumers and restaurateurs. Chefs traditionally love caviar. Its complex taste and texture add an exquisite note to haute cuisine. Alone as an appetizer, it symbolizes the ultimate luxury food.

"Caviar plays an extremely important role in my cuisine," Timothy Hollingsworth, who is wrapping up his stint as chef de cuisine at the French Laundry, told the Wall Street Journal. "Russian caviar is, unfortunately, pretty much obsolete. So having an alternative that is local, and sustainable, is simply – great."

The switch to domestic caviar has another upside. Besides a growing local supply, prices are lower.

Sterling's caviar is priced at \$62 to \$88 for 30 grams (about 1 ounce), depending on grade. An ounce of imported Russian Osetra caviar can cost \$300 and up.

San Francisco-based Tsar Nicoulai Caviar also farms its product in the Sacramento Valley. An ounce of its California Estate caviar – from Wilton-raised sturgeon – costs \$70.

How did Sacramento become the caviar capital? Location and luck.

Struffenegger points to UC Davis. Serge Doroshov, an animal science professor, brought Russian insight to California aquaculture. Doroshov's research and studies on sturgeon helped local farmers get a huge head start on caviar production as an alternative to wild catches.

America's largest freshwater fish, white sturgeon predate humans in the Central Valley. Roaming at sea from the Aleutian Islands to Monterey, they can live for decades and reach mammoth proportions – up to 20 feet long and more than 1,000 pounds. They return to the river to spawn.

Covered with bony armor, sturgeon have a serpentlike appearance that make them the “monsters” of the Delta. They've changed little in 175 million years.

“We really don't know how long they can live,” Struffenegger said. “We know they can live to be 70 or 80 years old, but in the depth of the river, it could be 400 years. They have no natural aging process.”

Sterling got its original breeding stock – just a few fish – from the Sacramento River with permission from the state's Department of Fish and Wildlife.

“It's technology at work,” said Fish and Wildlife's Randy Lovell. “These farms take pressure off the wild catch. When you consider how long it takes these fish to reproduce, they're very vulnerable.”

Sturgeon thrive in warm groundwater, which at Sterling's hatchery stays at 65 to 75 degrees.

“It's an eternal summer for these fish,” Struffenegger said. “People ask, what's our secret? Our fish have a much easier life.”

With an excellent diet and human help, the huge fish reach maturity in half the time.

“In the wild, they’re bottom feeders – they’ll eat anything,” Struffenegger explained. “They have tough winters when they struggle for food and don’t grow. Here, it’s like they have two summers in every year. They’re always growing.”

The proof swims in large above-ground tanks, sheltered in warehouses 15 miles north of downtown Sacramento. Leaping and splashing, thousands of sturgeon swim circles around 40-foot tanks, 9 feet deep. They’re separated by age, size and eventually sex.

“They have a hierarchy,” Struffenegger said. “The biggest ones lurk down at the bottom.”

No matter their swim speed, these fish are slow food. It takes three years to determine which fish are male or female. Caviar is harvested from fully mature females, usually at age 10.

Only the biggest and best females will become caviar mamas. (The others: smoked sturgeon.)

Harvested in spring, the eggs typically make up 20 to 25 percent of a fish’s weight. A 100-pounder can yield 20 or more pounds of caviar. Like dark pearls of tapioca, the eggs can range in color from olive green to obsidian black. Salt is added as a preservative.

Lucy Bowman, Sterling’s quality control expert, tastes caviar from every fish harvested. That was about 3,000 spoonfuls this year.

“At 40 calories a tablespoon, it adds up,” joked the 27-year-old Louisiana native. “That’s why I work out a lot.

“Not many people have this job,” she added. “Even my mama can’t believe it.”

Every fish at Sterling is numbered and tracked; so is its Sacramento-grown caviar. “We know everything about that fish,” Castano said. “We bred it, we raised it, we harvested it. We know that it’s sustainable. You can’t say that about wild caviar.”

Drinking too much can quickly ruin holiday season

By Carolyn Butler, Washington Post

’Tis definitely the season to eat, drink and be merry. Some of us, however, take those festive guidelines a wee bit too seriously – particularly with eggnog, mulled wine, champagne and other alcoholic beverages.

Why do people drink too much during the holidays?

“A lot of traditions at this time of year involve alcohol,” says Virginia clinical psychologist Diane Hoekstra. “You’re with friends and family who you may not see all the time, and you really want to have a good time, and so you celebrate with a few drinks, which isn’t harmful as long as you’re aware of your limits.” Unfortunately, that can be more difficult when you’re not used to drinking a lot, as well as when you’re guzzling seasonal cocktails that you’re not particularly accustomed to.

“Most of us don’t drink Champagne or cognac or eggnog on a regular basis,” explains Daniel Z. Lieberman, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at George Washington University. “I may know that three to four beers is my limit, but I have no idea what it is with brandy or eggnog, so it’s

possible to lose track much more easily.”

The strife and strain that often build during the holidays can also play a role in overdrinking. “Sometimes you’re at parties or getting together with extended family that maybe people don’t necessarily feel totally comfortable with, and drinking is a way to grease those wheels a little bit,” says Lieberman. “There is so much pressure to be happy during the holidays, so much pressure to be with loved ones, that if you’re going through a difficult time, like with a divorce or a loss or you don’t have someone in your life at this period of time, it’s really magnified.”

Hoekstra agrees, adding that mental health concerns, stress and distress all go up during the holidays because of family conflicts, financial concerns and any number of other issues, especially for those with preexisting depression. “Unfortunately, many people medicate their pain or depression with alcohol, or use it as a potential stress release,” she says. “I often see people who don’t have a real alcohol problem drinking and doing things they wouldn’t normally do at this time of year.”

While it may seem as though the only consequence of too much eggnog is the occasional pounding hangover at work or at the holiday pageant at your kid’s school, boozing can have serious ramifications, starting with the documented uptick in drunken driving accidents and fatalities in the Christmas/New Year’s period.

Beyond that, Lieberman notes that frequent drinking on the holiday party circuit can run your body down and hamper immunity during cold and flu season, not to mention damage your liver in the long term. Hoekstra adds that another major concern is getting so blitzed at an office holiday celebration that you say or do something you regret.

“Your judgment is seriously impaired when drinking, which I

think we all know can lead someone to engage in appalling, embarrassing, inappropriate behaviors that have potentially dangerous repercussions on the job, especially with [the rise of] Facebook and other social media,” she says.

Boozing can also play a role in holiday weight gain. Registered dietitian Cheryl Harris, of Harris Whole Health in Alexandria, points out that a glass of wine has approximately 100 calories, while many mixed drinks are in the 200-to-300-calorie range and eggnog is 400 or so calories per glass.

“It adds up pretty quickly,” she says, noting that there’s also a “tendency to forget about all your other food plans after you’ve had a few,” and thus to binge on Christmas cookies, pigs in blankets or whatever other goodies are in front of you.

For anyone who’s interested in trying to curtail their cocktail habit this Christmas or beyond, Harris offers a few simple tips that work no matter what your motivation for cutting back:

- Alternate sparkling water (or something else nonalcoholic) with any alcohol you consume.
- Go for a wine spritzer, or add ice to wine or other drinks. You’ll feel as though you’re having more alcohol than you actually are, and you’ll be drinking at a slower pace.
- Figure out beforehand how many drinks you will actually enjoy without feeling lousy the next day. It’s easier to say no when you know that the third rum punch will give you a nasty hangover.
- After setting a drink quota for the night, spread them out over the course of the evening.
- Don’t make drinking the focus of your partygoing. Choose something else, such as dancing, catching up with friends or

taking pictures.

- Have a distinctly flavored hard candy in your mouth whenever you don't want to be drinking. Since flavors such as peppermint and cinnamon would taste atrocious with most alcoholic beverages, it will be an easy reminder that you've decided to stop.
 - Always have some of what you love. Studies have shown that when people know they are not allowed to have a certain food, cravings for that food increase. So even though eggnog is a calorie and fat bomb, have a small cup and enjoy it fully if that's what makes your holiday season complete, and then skip something else.
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Eggnog the hard way

By Rosie Schaap, New York Times

Around this time last year, I advocated forgoing eggnog in favor of glogg, the Scandinavian mulled wine. I'm not here to issue a mea culpa, but I'm also not proud when it comes to holiday drinks and certainly not above a little backpedaling.

I have nothing against eggnog. What kind of heartless character could resist its creamy, eggy, decadent charms? But I have an all-or-nothing attitude about it. To my mind, there are two approaches. The first is to buy the best prefab nog available at your grocery store, doctor it with a generous grating of nutmeg, lace it with liquor and be done with it. (I like Ronnybrook Farm Dairy's offering, in those sturdy glass bottles.) But keeping ready-made eggnog close at hand is a peril for me. It's just too easy to pour one little glass after another, and I'm the sort of person who can resist

temptation only when it's not sitting in my fridge.

So I'm more likely to go with the second approach, which produces even more spectacular results: eggnog the hard way. I've tried simplified recipes that demand little more than mixing egg yolks, sugar, cream, milk and spirits, folding in some beaten egg whites and chilling the lot of it. This is inevitably a turnoff for people who just can't stomach the idea of eating raw eggs, but for me it's more a matter of flavor and texture than of food safety. I find the taste of raw egg overbearing, and the consistency can't compete with the lush silkiness that a patiently executed custard base assures. So I go all in, which essentially entails making a custard, letting it rest in an ice bath, stirring vigorously, straining and waiting. This requires time and effort, but it's absolutely worth it.

Once you've signed on, the only controversy is how to liquor it up. Bourbon and brandy have their champions, but rum gets my vote. Its darkly sugared, inherently spicy nature contributes what is, to my taste, the most complementary layer of additional flavor, along with the requisite alcohol. My choice is Rhum Barbancourt 5-star, aged 8 years, from Haiti, a delicious bargain at about \$25 a bottle.

By now, it's obvious that I'm not antinog. But I'll cop to an occasional resistance. Sometimes in the dead of winter, I just don't want to drink anything so frosty. In such cases, I prefer a Tom & Jerry, a warmed-up variation of eggnog most especially beloved in the upper Midwest. The ingredients are similar, though it skips the cream, ups the spices and takes the chill off. It's a homey, old-fashioned surprise, and few holiday sights are more alluring to me than a vintage Tom & Jerry serving bowl – rendered in milk glass and illustrated with holly and ivy – with matching cups. Just make sure there's a ladle nearby; everyone will want to dip right in. You can save the glogg for another cold winter's night.

Coconut craze straining the supply chain

By Krista Mahr, Time

Under a metal roof in Dandagamuwa, in western Sri Lanka, a line of seated men and women swing their small axes in sharp, neat strokes. Chips of brown coconut husk fly into the muggy October air, thick with the ripe smell of fermenting fruit. In seven or eight swift flicks of the wrist, the hatcheters render each coconut into a smooth white globe that they pass on to be shredded, dried and pressed into oil. At the end of the line, pallets of neatly labeled mason jars wait, ready to be shipped.

The destination: a Los Angeles warehouse some 9,300 miles away – and eventually, the shelves of natural-food stores across the U.S. The coconut is becoming America's latest trendy exotic edible, following the path of the pomegranate and the acai berry. The hottest part of the market is coconut water, the clear, slightly sweet liquid inside the fruit: sales of coconut-water drinks in the U.S. and Europe have doubled to more than \$265 million in 2011 and are expected to double again in the U.S. this year, according to New Nutrition Business, a consulting group in London. "Coconut water is the fastest growing beverage category in the world," says Julian Mellentin, director of New Nutrition Business. "It's growing even faster than energy drinks."

Other parts of the coconut are in demand too. Coconut oil, once demonized for its high saturated-fat content, has been rehabilitated by research extolling its health benefits and by the popularity of vegan baking. The organic, fair-trade virgin

coconut oil produced in Dandagamuwa for the Dr. Bronner's brand can be used as a substitute for butter.

It has all the makings of a health-food success story, but growers and processors are worried that the coconut craze may not be sustainable. The supply chain is efficient globally but not locally. Coconuts are grown mainly by small farmers from Brazil to Kenya to Indonesia, who often sell their output to middlemen. In many places, that means the sudden popularity of coconuts is not yet translating into higher prices for farmers. There is plenty of fruit now, but as producers work through existing supply, they worry that future supplies may be unreliable. For years, many farmers in Asia have been selling their crops without replanting because the prices they get are too low to justify increasing production. Fair-trade programs have not yet reached as far into the coconut trade as they have with other commodities, like coffee. For an industry in a growth spurt, that's trouble.

Down on the farm

Unlike most supermarket produce, coconuts are typically grown by smallholders, farmers who own or rent less than a dozen acres of land. They frequently sell their fruit to middlemen, who in turn sell it to factories that produce dried coconut meat, coconut husk, coconut oil and – more and more – coconut water. In their native areas, coconut trees grow abundantly without much tending, and farmers often don't earn enough to afford chemical fertilizers. That's a boon for companies selling the "natural" appeal of coconuts, since prices can be low and many coconut estates are organic by default.

The rise in demand has been dramatic. In the Philippines, the world's second largest coconut producer after Indonesia, the government estimates that coconut-water exports quadrupled in the first quarter of 2012 compared with the same period in 2011. Across Asia, coconut-oil exports to the U.S. have grown 3.3 percent annually over the past five years, according to

the Asian and Pacific Coconut Community (APCC), a Jakarta-based industry group.

But in many cases, the middlemen are grabbing more of the profit – and passing on little to the growers. In Asia, middlemen are paid 25 percent to 50 percent more per coconut than what they pay farmers. In Sri Lanka, companies that make desiccated coconut, or copra, from which oil is extracted, pay middlemen about 23 per nut, while middlemen pay growers as little as 17. Because of a shortage, prices in Sri Lanka are up, but in Thailand, where supply is flush, prices have dropped to 5 per pounds from 19 per pounds last year, according to the APCC. As a result, struggling farmers continue to harvest their trees but don't plant new ones.

To avoid bottlenecks, processors are looking beyond their original source countries. Dr. Bronner's, which uses coconut oil in soaps and for food-grade oil, used to buy its coconut oil from the Philippines before setting up its fair-trade operation in Sri Lanka in 2007. The company has built a new factory in Kenya and is considering another in Mexico. Vita Coco, one of the dominant coconut-water brands in the U.S., once bought coconuts only from Brazil, using a local company to produce, flash-pasteurize and ship the juice out in Tetra Paks. Because it had only one source, "demand was increasing faster than we could produce," says Arthur Gallego, Vita Coco's spokesman. "There were multiple times that Vita Coco had to turn down major retail partners because the product wasn't going to be available." The company found new suppliers in Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Mexico, and those countries now provide a significant share of its coconuts.

A serious warning

Some farmers facing stagnant prices are already giving up. Coconut plantations across Asia aren't getting any bigger, and in some cases they're getting smaller as farmers sell their land or convert it to more profitable crops like palm oil. As

demand pushes up prices, coconut farming will become more attractive, but until the market adjusts and young trees mature, producers are scrambling. "It's a really serious warning to business players," says Amrizal Idroes, the APCC's market-development officer. Companies will eventually have to offer higher prices, he says, to fortify growers' commitment—and their own supply.

A few producers are thinking ahead by making the farmer an integral and better-compensated part of the supply chain. When Harmless Harvest started producing coconut water in 2011, the craze was in full swing. To differentiate their brand, founders Justin Guilbert and Douglas Riboud designed production so that raw, fresh juice would be bottled within hours of harvest, deep-frozen, processed without heat treatment and shipped to the U.S. in a few weeks. They tried and failed to set up this tricky system in Brazil, Mexico and Sri Lanka before finding a partner in Thailand. Harmless Harvest pays to get farmers' crops certified as organic and buys those coconuts for as much as double the price of conventional coconuts. "It's in my best interest that a farmer ... gets the best advantage out of my experience with them," says Guilbert.

Investing in relationships with farmers has a long-term payoff too. Serendipol, Dr. Bronner's partner in Sri Lanka, spent months visiting farmers, explaining how switching to organic methods could help raise their yields and incomes. "We built up credibility by offering them a better price, buying consistently and paying immediately," says managing director Gordon De Silva. J.M. Gunarathbanda, a bespectacled 62-year-old, has been supplying coconuts to Dr. Bronner's through Serendipol since 2008. Standing under a heavy, palm-fringed canopy, he says his 600 trees have borne more fruit after he started using compost and he's making more money than when he sold his crop to other factories. He is dismayed, though, that his neighbors have built on their land instead of planting

more trees. “Exporting is better,” he says. “It’s good for the country.”

Fleeting season makes pomegranates worth the effort

By Chris Macias, Sacramento Bee

Oh pomegranate, you can be such a pain. Extracting your juicy seeds can be so messy, turning a white T-shirt into an impromptu tie-dye. Yet, pomegranate, you are so darn delicious and healthy, and perfect for cooking or simply munching the seeds as a sweet snack.

Pomegranate ranks as an especially high-maintenance fruit, but get past its staining properties and trickiness in extracting the seeds, and you’ll find plenty of payoffs in the kitchen. Sprinkle pomegranate seeds (also known as arils) over a salad to add some fruity snap, and use its rich juice in sauces and marinades.

We’re now in the thick of pomegranate season, which generally starts in November and lasts through January. While the pomegranate is native to Western Asia – Iran and Iraq in particular – this sweet and tangy fruit has also found a home in California. Pomegranate trees thrive in areas with dry, sunny summers and cool winters, much like California’s Central Valley and nearby Placer County.

According to the California Pomegranate Council, 4.5 million cases of pomegranates are shipped annually from the state’s growers. Pomegranates are increasingly popular. In 2011, California was home to 30,000 acres of pomegranates – up from

about 12,000 acres in 2006.

Some of that pomegranate winds up with Elaine Baker. She's one of the Sacramento area's most prominent pastry chefs, now working at Hawks in Granite Bay. One of her latest creations: a bittersweet chocolate baton with gingerbread purée, pomegranate sauce and pomegranate seeds.

"It's a beautiful fruit, just the seeds themselves," said Baker. "That's why I like to use it on desserts. It's a bit of a pain to use, but if you can keep it nice and clear there's a beautiful, deep red color."

But before we get into pomegranate reduction sauces and such, what's the best way to deseed the darn thing? For starters, when shopping for a pomegranate, look for a fruit that boasts smooth skin and a rich red color. A mature pomegranate may also have a cracked skin, which for some folks marks the optimal time for eating.

"When they get that little crack, that's the peak of good," said Ralene Snow of Snow's Citrus Court, which grows pomegranates in Placer County.

Deseeding the pomegranate is the tricky part, and can also stain your countertop if you're not careful. Here's one method:

1. Cut the crown off the fruit.
2. Cut through the skin in quadrants.
3. Break the fruit into four pieces.
4. With the seeds facing down into a bowl, bonk the top of the pomegranate with a wooden spoon to release the seeds.
5. Rinse the seeds in a colander and enjoy.

A typical fruit usually yields 1/2 to 3/4 of a cup of seeds.

Then, the fun can begin.

Pomegranates usually are out of season by the end of January. The seeds, however, can be frozen if you're interested in making a sorbet or granita for a future day.

K's Kitchen: A chowder without any clams

By Kathryn Reed

One of the good things about cookbooks is authors will put together ingredients I would never have thought of combining. My leap of faith to trust the author has backfired from time to time, but usually the recipe is a keeper.



Such was the case recently as I was in search of new soup recipes. It seems like I've already gone through my usuals and it isn't even technically winter.

I really liked the recipe below because it is different, the flavor is great and it was thick. Sometimes soups that are more broth than anything else don't seem like a meal. Sue liked the soup, but was not as enamored as I was with it.

I don't really know how much corn I used because during the summer I had blanched ears of corn and then froze the kernels. And one of the two bags I used had green and red peppers in it.

I didn't use any salt because I think soy sauce is pretty darn salty. I used a full 2 T of soy sauce.

As for the mushrooms, I'm pretty sure what I have are wood ear mushrooms that I got in San Francisco. But the packaging doesn't say. There is a Chinese market in the Town and Country Center in South Lake Tahoe where Whiskey Dicks is.

This recipe is from "The New Moosewood Cookbook" by Mollie Katzen. All the comments below are hers.

Chinese Vegetable Chowder (4 to 6 servings)

Simple and delicious – made with no dairy products no eggs, no oil, no garlic, no onions!

The mushrooms need to soak for at least 30 to 40 minutes ahead of time, and this can be done a day or two in advance.

2 ounces dried Chinese black mushrooms

5 C boiling water

1 pound package frozen corn, defrosted

1-1½ tsp salt

1-2 T soy sauce

black pepper, to taste

1 medium carrot, diced

1 stalk celery, minced

1 8-ounce can water chestnuts, minced

Place the mushrooms in a medium-large bowl, and pour in the boiling water. Cover with a plate and let stand for at least 30 to 40 minutes, or until the mushrooms are soaked through and very soft. Drain well, reserving both the mushrooms and the water, squeezing all the excess liquid from the mushrooms.

Place the mushrooms on a cutting board and slice thinly, removing and discarding their tough stems.

Combine the mushroom water and the corn in a food processor or blender, and puree until as smooth as possible. (You will probably have to do this in more than one batch.) Transfer to a kettle or a large saucepan. (For a smoother soup, you can strain the puree on its way into the kettle.) Stir in salt, soy sauce, and black pepper to taste.

Lightly steam the carrot and the celery until just tender. (If you have one, a microwave oven will do this in 2 minutes.)

Add sliced mushrooms from step 1, carrot, celery, and water chestnuts to the soup. Heat gently just before serving.