

Nick and Choose {NICK ALTSCHULLER}

GET PUMPED

Nick bites into fall's favorite flavor.



THE MENU IS THE NEW FARMER'S Almanac. When crates of clematines appear, it's time to bundle up. When you're dodging yet another volley of asparagus spears, the sweaters can head for storage. Used to be, sticking a wet finger in the air would tell you how the winds were changing. Now you just have to stick out your tongue.

No flavor marks a season more than pumpkin, a squash that has squeezed its way into everything from cheesecake to cocktails. But does the taste of a filthy, rigid, warty fruit enhance these products? It was time to gorge.

My first stop was Starbucks for a pumpkin-spice latte, an endeavor that was doomed from the start. I drink coffee like a masochist, with each sip delivering a delicious jolt of pain and the chance to dirty-talk my java under my breath. Lattes are usually tepid, and while the pumpkin flavor in this one started sweet, there was an oddly salty finish. As one coworker remarked, "That would stay with me all day, in a bad way."

If I was going to regret drinking something, it might as well get me drunk. So I moved on to beer, perhaps the most popular and heterogeneous sector of pumpkin-flavored products. My friends Chris and SooAe—who've embraced adulthood more openly than the rest of my maturity-challenged pals—had thrown a pumpkin-themed dinner party. I didn't attend, but the following morning I leapt out of my racecar bed to help them finish the booze.

We began with seven different beers, an array of glasses and one snooty observation: There's no pumpkin in the bouquet. Chris decided Fisherman's Pumpkin Stout has the aroma of coffee milk. Huffing the Weyerbacher Imperial Pumpkin Ale, SooAe decreed, "This smells like Crabtree & Evelyn."

The reasoning is the seasoning, and when picking a pumpkin beer, what you should look for isn't accuracy in flavor, but ingredients that best match your preference in pumpkin pie. If you like brown sugar, allspice, cinnamon and nutmeg, try Dogfish Head Punkin Ale. If you abhor flavor of any kind, try

Blue Moon's Harvest Moon. But congrats to Shipyard's Pumpkinhead, this year's winner of the Best Seasonal Vehicle for Inebriation Award.

Testing my pie theory, I went to Toscanini's, where, due to pumpkin's popularity, the flavor had sold out. "I'm obsessed with it," said Alicia, behind the counter. "Fall and pumpkin go hand-in-hand."

"But what we really want is pumpkin pie, right?"

She answered with an immediate, almost conspiratorial "yes."

The girl at Lyndell's Bakery was equally obsessed with their equally sold-out pumpkin cupcakes. "Last night, people were buying them four at a time,"

she explained, as her enthusiasm for their quality quickly clouded her acumen for salesmanship. "Because they're like the pumpkin muffins at Dunkin' Donuts. Have you had those? Oh my God, I live for them."

On a return visit, I found that while the flavor could easily be carrot cake, Lyndell's does win points for presentation, with thick orange frosting, striations of green icing and a candy stem. Much like with the beer, inaccuracy in flavor didn't hinder my guzzling.

In the end, the most

faithful, and tasty, presentation was pumpkin soup from Da Vinci's, which was the one thing I ingested that contained discernible pumpkin. Roasted and seasoned with cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger, the soup also includes pancetta, allowing you to not only dust off the stock phrase "everything's better with bacon," but to raise it to previously unfathomable levels of foodie pomposity.

Pumpkin is a tricky fruit. You can't just pick one up and take a bite. But then again, you don't see rhubarb lattes around, and, unlike pumpkin, that ingredient is never going to win a pie popularity contest. Maybe it's the color; maybe it's that they make great lanterns. But I suspect we love pumpkins because they're an excellent medium for cinnamon, cloves and allspice. Just stock up the cupboard, and you'll have the flavors of fall year-round. ***

Send your stories and suggestions to nick@improper.com.



Impersonals

HE'S NOT WORTHY

TO THE TALL, PRETTY BLONDE WOMAN WHO BOARDS THE COMMUTER RAIL AT MELROSE CEDAR PARK, ALWAYS FOUR STEPS BEHIND HER PARTNER:

You can only see the back of his bald head, with the sunglasses perched atop it, as he rushes to climb the steps onto the train. Has it ever occurred to you that he looks exactly like a six-year-old, oblivious to his mother trailing behind? Don't you deserve better than this jerk?

Dying to say something

To the overweight and unhygienic commuter who thought it was OK to clip her nails on the train:

The sound of clipping did not resonate well with my reading of my book, so luckily there was room for me a few rows back. I feel bad for the person who had to sit in your seat next. If they only knew that the sharp prick through their pants was a human nail, they would look twice before sitting down. So why don't you clip your nails in the privacy of your own home, and wash that rat's nest of yours while you're at it?

Disturbed commuter

To the unbelievably rude manager at the local climbing gym:

I won't be returning to your establishment. While the workout I get there might be great, nothing is worth the unpleasant atmosphere you create when you're around. The last straw was when you yelled at the young woman (in front of clients, no less!) who has graciously and pleasantly helped me several times when I've come in. Your lack of professionalism, obvious power trip and demeaning manner make me wonder how you ever weaseled your way into a leadership position in the first place. I have my suspicions...

Working out elsewhere

Unrequited crush? Bad hair? Need to vent? Send your e-mails of love and spleen to impersonals@improper.com, or fax 617-859-1446.