ALL ABOUT DRAGON FRUIT

WHAT IS DRAGON FRUIT? Dragon fruit, also known as pitaya, grows on a climbing cactus in tropical and sub-tropical regions around the world. Dragon fruit is oval-shaped and is covered in overlaid leaves, called bracts, that look like scales. As it ripens, the fruit turns red or yellow depending on the variety, with the scale tips remaining green. Dragon fruit is juicy with a mildly sweet flavor. The red or white flesh has a creamy consistency with crunchy edible seeds. Dragon fruit is available in summer and early fall. It is cultivated primarily in Vietnam, Thailand and China, but production is increasing in the Philippines, Australia and Hawaii.

HEALTH BENEFITS: Dragon fruit is considered a super fruit and is high in vitamins and minerals that have antioxidant properties to protect the body against free radicals that cause aging, cancer and disease. Dragon fruit contains vitamin C for a strong immune system and iron for healthy blood. The fiber in dragon fruit helps control weight by giving the stomach a full feeling. The seeds not only add a nutty flavor, but they are full of healthy fats that are important for brain development and blood pressure regulation. Red-fleshed dragon fruit contains lycopene, a plant pigment that acts as an antioxidant to help reduce the risk of heart attacks.

SELECTING, STORING AND COOKING:
- When selecting dragon fruit, it should yield gently to pressure. Avoid fruit that has dark bruises or has dry, brown spines.
- Dragon fruit can be stored in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to five days. The flesh can be frozen and kept for up to three months.
- Ripe dragon fruit flesh should separate easily from the skin. Cut the fruit into quarters and peel the skin or scoop the flesh out with a spoon. The skin is not edible.
- Make a fruit granite with frozen dragon fruit or add to smoothies for creaminess.
- Combine dragon fruit with other tropical fruit such as mango and pineapple for a healthy fruit salad. Blend dragon fruit into yoghurts and parfaits or add to pancake or waffle batter.
- Make a dragon fruit salsa with onions, cilantro and lime juice and add to fish or shrimp tacos.

INTERESTING FACTS
- Ancient Chinese legends say that the dragon fruit was created thousands of years ago by a dragon in battle who blew a burst of fire containing the fruit.
- The dragon fruit in Hawaii supposedly come from the wall of Punahou School where Mrs. Bingham planted the cactus in 1836.
- The white cactus flower opens in the evening and releases a beautiful scent ready for pollination. It wilts by morning.