Chestnuts are the fruit of the Castanea tree. These trees belong to the family Fagaceae, which also includes oaks and beeches. A spiny husk called a burr protects the chestnut. Chestnuts are typically harvested mid-September through November and are one of the easiest nut varieties to harvest and prepare for storage. Do not confuse the horse chestnut for an edible chestnut tree. Horse chestnuts are poisonous; their husks are mostly smooth, with a small number of bumpy spines. Nor should they be confused with water chestnut, which are aquatic vegetables that grow in marshes.

Chestnuts trees have grown across China and Japan since ancient times. The Greeks brought them to Europe from Asia Minor. Later, they spread across the continent with the Romans. For many Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries chestnuts were an important staple food. Italians even used them to make polenta before the introduction of maize from the New World.

Chestnuts predominantly contain complex carbohydrates, which the body digests slowly for a stable energy source. According to an experiment performed by scientists in 2010, the antioxidant properties of chestnut flower extract can help fight skin cancer. Antioxidants, like those found in chestnuts, increase your body’s defenses against a multitude of illnesses.

**HEALTHY INGREDIENT CONTRIBUTION**

*Values from NutritionData.com based on Chestnuts, European, dried, peeled (100 grams)*

**MANGANESE:** One serving of chestnuts contains fifty-nine percent of the daily-recommended value of manganese. This macro mineral plays an important role in the normal functioning of the nervous system and helps break down proteins and fat.

**COPPER:** As a cofactor for enzymes such as superoxide dismutase, copper is important to the body. Thirty-three percent of the daily-recommended value of copper can be found in chestnuts.

**POTASSIUM:** Chestnuts contain twenty-eight percent of the daily-recommended value of potassium. Potassium helps to control blood pressure and heart rate. It is also important in neuron functioning.

**FOLATE:** One serving of chestnuts provides twenty-two of the recommended dietary allowance per 100 grams. Consuming foods rich in folate prior to conception helps decrease the occurrence of neural tube defects in babies.

**VITAMIN C:** Chestnuts contain twenty-five percent of the daily-recommended value of vitamin C. This vitamin helps the body develop resistance against infections and promotes a healthy immune system.

**THIAMIN:** One serving of chestnuts contain twenty-four percent of the daily-recommended value of thiamin, otherwise known as Vitamin B-1. Thiamin plays an important role in improving the cardiovascular function of the body and maintaining a healthy nervous system.
TYPES AND VARIETIES

European - European chestnut trees are flowering trees that are native to Asia Minor, Southern Europe, and are widely cultivated throughout the temperate world. The bark of these trees have a net pattern. Fissures, or deep furrows, run spirally up the trunk in both directions. The branches emerge from low height from the trunk.

Chinese - Chinese chestnut trees are native to China, Korea, and Taiwan. They have a broad crown. The leaves are arranged in an alternating fashion. The fruit of Chinese chestnut trees is cup-shaped and densely spiny.

Japanese - Japanese chestnut trees are native to Japan and South Korea. The nuts are larger than nuts of the American chestnut. The tips of nuts are pointed. They have a few hairs on its surface. Each bur contains two to three nuts.

American - The American chestnut is native to Eastern North America and has spreading foliage that covers an extensive area. It may have a round, vase or umbrella shape, depending on pruning. The nuts are enclosed in a tan velvet lined burr that is spiny and green in color.

SELECTING AND STORING

• When the chestnut is mature, the burrs will open, and that is when you want to remove the husks. Leave the dark brown inner shell.

• Chestnuts that are in the shell dry out and shrink as they age. Test the freshness of chestnuts by shaking them. If you hear rattling inside the shell, they may be too dry to eat.

• Choose nuts that are heavy for their size with glossy, smooth shells. Give a squeeze to check that the nut inside is plump and full.

• Freshly picked chestnuts start quite crisp and become more tender and chewy over the following days or weeks before deteriorating to a dry and floury texture.

• Storage in the refrigerator slows the ageing process.

INTERESTING FACTS

• Ham from pigs reared on a diet rich in chestnuts is highly valued in many areas of France, Spain, and Italy

• Corsica, Italy is home to an annual chestnut festival in December.

• American chestnut trees were some of the most prominent and important forest trees before a fungal disease in the early 20th century devastated their numbers.

• Chestnut trees have a lifespan of 200 to 800 years, depending on the species.

CULINARY USES

Chestnuts are a wonderful addition to any mealtime. Breakfast, lunch, dinner- even snacks! They can be used as an alternative to most other nuts though their sweet and earthy flavor will give any dish a unique twist.

• Chestnut Flour – Not only is chestnut flour gluten-free, it is also perfect for sweet muffins and breads. In Corsica, the flour is fried into doughnut-like fritters called fritelli.

• Roasted Chestnuts – For many, roasted chestnuts are a holiday favorite. Drunken chestnuts are roasted and then flambéed in rum, for a great snack or light dessert.

• Braised chestnuts – Whole chestnuts are often braised and served with onion.

• Chestnut butter – Chestnut butter makes alternative to peanut, almond, or hazelnut butter.

“You are like a chestnut burr, prickly outside, but silky-soft within, and a sweet kernel, if one can only get at it. Love will make you show your heart some day, and then the rough burr will fall off.”

-Louisa May Alcott