WHAT ARE CHESTNUTS?
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.

Health benefits Chestnuts predominantly contain complex carbohydrates, which your body digests slowly for a stable energy source. Chestnuts contain over half of the daily-recommended value of manganese, which plays an important role in the normal functioning of the nervous system. 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 illnesses.

BUYING, STORING, AND COOKING

• 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.

• Chestnuts can be used as an alternative to most other nuts though their sweet and earthy flavor will give any dish a unique twist.

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.