Edible seaweed, or sea vegetables, are seaweeds that can be eaten and used in the preparation of food. They may belong to one of several groups of multicellular algae: the red algae, green algae, and brown algae. Most edible seaweeds are marine algae whereas most freshwater algae are toxic. Edible seaweed has an umami flavor—a pleasant savory taste, which results from a high level of the amino acid, glutamate.

Edible Seaweed has been integrated into diets around the world for far longer than most people realize. It is reported that at least six types of seaweeds were used in 800 A.D in everyday cooking in Japan. In 600 BC, Sze Teu wrote that in China, seaweed was made for special guests or kings. One of the oldest recorded writings in Iceland, dating back to 961 BC, included detailed regulations about coastal property rights to be respected in the collection of sea vegetables. Perhaps most surprising, archeological evidence shows people in Monte Verde, Southern Chile have harvested, preserved seaweed for long term storage and used seaweeds for food and medicinal purposes for upwards of 20,000 years.

In general, eating edible seaweed is a simple way to boost a person’s intake of vitamins and minerals without adding many calories. Edible seaweed typically contains a high amount of fiber and sodium. One study in 2014 pointed to certain species of seaweed as being a possible vegan source of biologically-active Vitamin B12. The study noted that B-12 was found in both raw and roasted seaweed, the latter containing about half as much—but still a sufficient amount.

Healthy Ingredient Contribution

Values from NutritionData.com based on Seaweed, wakame, raw (100 grams)

MANGANESE: Edible Seaweed contains approximately 70 percent of the daily recommended value of manganese. This macromineral plays an important role in the normal functioning of the nervous system and helps break down proteins and fat.

FOLATE: Edible seaweed is rich in folate, about 49% of the daily recommended value is in one serving. Folate is an essential nutrient for DNA synthesis and other metabolic functions. It is especially important during pregnancy.

SODIUM: Edible seaweed like wakame contains 36% of the daily recommended value of sodium. Sodium is key to helping send electrical signals between cells and controlling the amount of fluid in your body.

MAGNESIUM: There is 27% of the daily recommended value of magnesium in edible seaweed. Magnesium keep muscles, the heart and the nervous system functioning normally. It helps to regulate blood sugar levels, which is important to keeping a normal blood pressure.

CALCIUM: One serving of edible seaweed contains 15% of the daily-recommended value (DV) of calcium. Calcium plays a major role in the mineralization of bone health since 99% of the body’s calcium is stored in the bones.
TYPES AND VARIETIES

**NORI:** Nori is a species of red algae. It is pressed into thin, dried sheets that turn from dark green to black. Many Americans associate “edible seaweed” with Nori. It is used as a wrap for sushi rolls and onigiri, and as a garnish in various soups — most notably ramen. Nori is also becoming a popular ingredient in salad dressing, seasonings and seaweed chips.

**WAKAME:** Wakame is also known as sea mustard. Native to many coastal areas around the globe (and one of the world’s most invasive species), the dark green-colored wakame has a subtly sweet flavor and a silky texture. It is usually distributed dried or salted, and it expands greatly in size after being cooked. This variety is most often found in Miso soup. However, it can be implemented into a variety of dishes such as slaw, pesto and salads.

**KOMBU:** A form of edible kelp, kombu is most eaten in East Asia. It is sold dried or pickled in vinegar and is a dark green-brown. It is most known as being one of the main ingredients in Japanese dashi soup.

**DULSE:** Dulse is a reddish-purple seaweed that grows on the northern coasts of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. It is normally dried and sold either in whole-leaf form, flaked, or as a powder. Dulse is very nutritious and its nutritional value does not degrade after it is converted into powder or flakes. If you pan-fry dried, whole-leaf dulse with oil, it is said to create a “bacon-like” flavor.

**IRISH MOSS:** Irish Moss is known as carrageen, from the Irish word for “little rock,” and looks somewhat like a baby tree, with sections forking off from a small stalk to form fingers. Though Irish moss is a naturally deep purplish red, the seaweed turns white when it washes ashore. Because of its quantity of carrageen-sugar molecules- it is often used as a thickening agent and stabilizer in products such as ice cream.

**UMIBUDO:** These “sea grapes” are one of the few seaweed varieties sold fresh rather than dried to preserve the tiny clusters of bubble-like leaves that grow on long stems. The tiny pearls burst in the mouth when eaten. Umibudo is a staple in Okinawan cuisine where it is prized for its taste and nutritional benefits. They are often served raw with soy sauce.

STORING TIPS

**SHEETS:** Keep sheets of edible seaweed such as Nori fresh by keeping it sealed in a zip-lock bag or a tightly sealed glass jar. Consider adding a “do not eat” package of silica gel to absorb the moisture so that the seaweed will stay dry. In humid environments, you may want to freeze your sheets for an extended shelf life. Foods freeze indefinitely, but the quality declines over time.

**FRESH:** Storing fresh seaweed can vary depending on the variety. However, it is always best to use fresh seaweed as soon as possible. It will keep in the fridge for only a few days. Some varieties freeze well. Do not wash fresh seaweed before storing.

INTERESTING FACTS

- The dish often served in western Chinese restaurants as ‘Crispy Seaweed’ is not seaweed but cabbage that has been dried and then fried.
- Seaweed oil is also used for biofuel, massage oil, soaps, and lotions.
- Agar or agar-agar is a colorless, flavorless substance extracted from various red algae. It is used as an alternative to gelatin.
- About 70% of the world’s oxygen comes from seaweeds and other marine algae.