



By Lorne McClinton

Fibre & flavour

Canadians are learning to love lentils

Chef Nicky Makris had to bribe local farmers to grow the lentils he needed for his recipes when he first opened Nicky's Cafe in Regina, Sask., in 1986. Twenty-three years (and 3 million bowls of his famous lentil soup) later, it's a completely different situation. Canada is now the world's largest exporter of lentils, and Makris can easily buy the four tonnes of lentils he uses annually from local processors with just a phone call.

People have been eating lentils for thousands of years. Like wheat, lentils were native to the Middle East and were one of the first plants to be domesticated. They quickly became an

important dietary staple. Today they are one of the world's most widely grown legumes; there are about 8,000 known varieties on record.

Canadians grow and export a lot of lentils but, outside of the immigrant communities, haven't historically eaten the Mediterranean and South Asian staple. That may be changing; lentils are becoming the new "in" food. Hardly a week goes by where there isn't a story in the media touting their versatile nutritional benefits.

Healthy choice. Lentils are high in protein, calcium, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, iron, and dietary fiber. In May 2009, researchers from the Canadian Centre for Agri-Food Research

in Health and Medicine in Winnipeg, Man., released a study that showed daily consumption of lentils and other pulse crops would provide dramatic improvements in blood vessel function in individuals suffering from peripheral artery disease. Lentils also significantly lowered LDL cholesterol levels and helped study participants reduce their body mass index.

"Pulses (lentils, peas, and beans) are increasingly featured in food columns in magazines and newspapers," says Peter Watts with Pulse Canada, in Winnipeg. "People are calling them superfoods. We're finding that consumers, health professionals, and the mainstream food industry have more

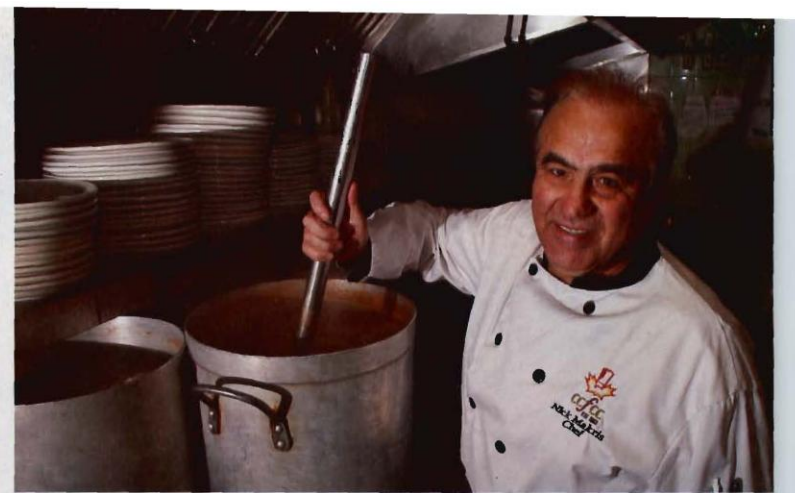


►**Above:** Large green, small green, and red lentils are the most common lentil classes grown in Canada. A small number of producers also grow french green and the black beluga variety as well.
►**Above inset:** Lentils are very quick and easy to prepare. Some are ready to eat in 15 minutes.

knowledge of pulses. There's more interest in them all the time."

According to AC Nielsen data supplied by Pulse Canada, lentil consumption has increased by more than 20% in Canada since 2006. Watts says overall pulse usage has increased by 10% in the same period.

"A lot of Canadian and North American consumers now appreciate lentils but the general population



►**Above:** Lentil soup has been a specialty of Chef Nicky Makris since he first opened his doors in 1986. He now serves about 250 litres of it a week.
►**Left:** Twenty-five years ago lentils were an oddity on the Canadian prairies. Today, Canada is the largest lentil exporter in the world.



isn't 100% on board yet," says Assaad Abdelnour, president of Clic Foods, a major Montreal, Que., based food processor. "A lot of people are aware of their health benefits but the major hurdle we still have is to try and better educate the general consumers on how they can use them."

No-soak simple. Lentils are very simple and easy to prepare. Unlike other pulses, they don't need to be pre-soaked before they are used. All you need to do to prepare them is add three parts water to one part lentil and boil them. Some varieties are ready to eat in as little as 15 minutes.

That's why lentils are sometimes called the original fast food. It's also a

big part of the reason behind all of the increased interest. They fit in perfectly with the growing consumer demand for fast, easy to prepare, nutritious foods. People still want to eat healthy foods but they don't seem to want to spend a lot of time in the kitchen.

People who love to cook find that they are an inexpensive but very versatile ingredient. Lentils play an important role in a vast number of Indian foods but they are also used extensively in Middle Eastern, French, and other Mediterranean cuisine.

Good staple. "I love lentils," Makris says. "I'm really spreading the word. It's a good staple food for everybody, even kids are now eating them. You can visit my Web site at www.nickys.ca to find my lentil soup recipe."

"We are trying to stimulate value for the industry by encouraging the mainstream North American audience to incorporate pulse dishes into their daily diet," Watts says. "We're focusing on the nutrition and health benefits and helping the food processing industry to become more familiar with them so they can use them effectively in their food products. In the long run, this will translate into more pulses being processed in Canada and create value for the industry." ■