

# VegNews

## Food

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## 2 Disease-Fighting Superfoods You Should be Eating

By [Savita Iyer-Ahrestani](#) | March 6, 2013



Bitter gourd and okra are staples in Indian diets, and for good reason: they're disease fighting, vitamin-filled health powerhouses.

My grandmother's kitchen in the south of India was a beehive of activity when I was growing up, a warm and friendly place with a host of laughing, chattering women—my mother, my aunts, and a helper or two—chopped, diced, sautéed, and seasoned a host of colorful vegetables. The mouthwatering smell of their creations was a prelude to many a delicious family meal, marred only by the unwanted (in my childhood book) presence of two vegetables: bitter gourd and okra. Indeed, the usual maternal admonishing of “they're good for you” couldn't have been truer because okra and bitter gourd are superfoods whose numerous health-related properties—particularly with respect to type 2 diabetes—are only now coming to the fore, thanks to the work of agencies like The World Vegetable Center, which is dedicated to improving the production and consumption of nutritious vegetables worldwide.

In March 2011, AVRDC spearheaded The Bitter Gourd Project, an initiative that seeks to lend scientific backing to the conventional wisdom that the vegetable can help in the treatment of type 2 Diabetes. “Chinese, Ayurvedic, and other traditional folk medicine practices have long used bitter gourd or bitter melon to treat type 2 diabetes and other ailments, yet there is little scientific support for its efficacy,” says Maureen Mecozzi, AVRDC's head of communications and information. “The nutritionists, plant breeders, medical doctors, and social scientists working on [the Bitter Gourd project] hope to optimize the level of anti-diabetic compounds in the vegetable through varietal selection and postharvest practices and preparation methods, and then develop evidence-based dietary strategies to assist diabetics in Asia and Africa.”

Bitter gourds, which can be crunched up raw or cooked into stews and curries, come in many shapes, sizes, and colors: green, white or yellowish; oblong or round; large or very small. In my grandmother's house, they were cooked up into a curry (see attached recipe) or simply sliced into small squares and sautéed with a little bit of salt, some fresh garlic, and ginger. “In Okinawa [Japan], people cut raw, small green bitter gourd into paper-thin slices, soak the slices in ice water for about an hour, drain, and serve with a squeeze of fresh lemon juice. It's delicious—and not bitter,” Mecozzi says. However, as its name suggests, bitterness is the bitter gourd's clincher, and it's the interaction of the unique blend of multiple compounds in each vegetable that give it its anti-diabetic properties, says Ray-yu Yang, a nutritionist at AVRDC.

Ditto for Okra: the “mucilage,” the slimy, sticky liquid that oozes out when the pods are cut and that I so hated as a child is the healthiest part of the vegetable. Okra is a wonderful source of vitamins A, B, and C, Mecozzi says. It's rich in iron and fiber, and contains tons of calcium. Okra also has very high levels of antioxidants such as xanthin and lutein and its seeds are high in protein, which is often lacking in the diets of people in developing countries. While young okra pods can be eaten raw, they can also be steamed, boiled, fried or roasted. And the mucilage can be used to thicken soups, stews and sauces, something my grandmother often did.

While it's never been a problem finding okra in grocery stores, today, it's equally easy to find bitter gourds in Asian and Indian grocery stores across the country. And as a testament to the growing belief in its medicinal properties, there's a plethora of bitter gourd pills, capsules, and teas available for sale on the Internet. I, too, have gotten over my childhood dislike of slimy okra and I actually enjoy it. But I have some work left to do in the bitter gourd realm, even though it continues to be a staple at my family home.

**Cook with these two nutritional powerhouses!**

[Roasted Okra](#)

[Bitter Gourd Curry](#)

**Savita Iyer-Ahrestani's** work has appeared in numerous print and online publications, including *cnn.com*, *Vogue (Mumbai, India, edition)*, and *Spirituality & Health magazine*.

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