

How to Smartly Sip the Flavors of Fall

My favorite season has arrived! It's time for multihued foliage; for Christmas music to play prematurely in grocery stores whose halls are still decked with black cats, bats and witches' hats; for scarves to be wrapped snugly around Texan necks in 60-degree weather; and for poor innocent pumpkins to be carved into and transformed into terrifying front porch ghouls or minions from *Despicable Me*.

I love pumpkins (*not* Jack-O-Lanterns). I love them so much that I purchased pumpkin face wash—"Christmas-scented," according to my husband—purely for the smell. (Sadly, it's too rich for my skin.)

When I was a little girl, I loved my mom's decorative papier-mâché pumpkin so much that I pretended she was a star pupil in my classroom of stuffed animals and American Girl dolls. Recently, I walked into the cookware store Williams-Sonoma with my mom to buy a potato peeler and was completely overcome by the intoxicating fragrance of pumpkins; I felt I had crawled into Cinderella's carriage as the clock struck midnight and that soon I'd be spitting out pumpkin seeds. Pumpkin candles, pumpkin butter, pumpkin plates, pumpkin loaf pans, pumpkin pot mitts, pumpkin patch wreaths. The presence of beta-carotene was turning my skin as yellow-orange as an autumn leaf.

Walking back outside, every other shopper had a Starbucks drink in hand, and I instantly thought, "Too bad a tall pumpkin spice latte from Starbucks contains 300 calories and 38 grams of sugar!" That's how my pumpkin fairy tale ended and how I became inspired to write this article.

So, what's not nice about pumpkin spice? I'll tell you: Hot,

festive fall drinks like eggnog, apple cider, hot chocolate and pumpkin spice lattes make for quick, easy, albeit delicious ways to take in lots of needless calories. As I mentioned earlier, a mere 12-ounce pumpkin spice latte from Starbucks boasts 38 grams of sugar. That fact is made even more alarming by recent studies that have shown sugar to be as addictive as cocaine.

Even in modest amounts, sugar activates the brain and releases a burst of dopamine into the bloodstream, much like cocaine's effect on the body. Just like drug addictions, the highs diminish with the more sugar you consume, so you develop an overwhelming desire for more and more to get that same feel-good fix.

So, is the price of a non-sugar-addicted body boring black coffee and uninspiring unsweetened tea? Perish the thought! Heart-warming cocoa and ice-melting mochas aren't all bad. In fact, indulging in chocolate, coffee and cinnamon has its perks—perks not solely related to caffeine, I might add.

- Coffee is full of antioxidants, which are molecules that are capable of preventing the damaging effects of oxidation within our cells. Research continues to prove that antioxidants help prevent heart disease, cancer, age-related macular degeneration and aging in general because they go to war against free radicals in the body.
- Professor Joe A. Vinson and other researchers at the University of Scranton have discovered that the antioxidants found in coffee play a role in enzyme and gene reaction and that coffee consumption daily cuts the risk of developing the most common form of diabetes.
- According to a Johns Hopkins study, a cup or two of coffee a day increases your sense of well-being and happiness. However, more than two cups a day (about 200 mg) have been shown to lead to increased anxiety, jitteriness, nervousness and upset stomach. (More does

not mean better!)

- After a hard workout, a cup or two of coffee has been shown to reduce muscle soreness more effectively than naproxen, aspirin and ibuprofen.
- According to a study conducted at Cornell University, the antioxidant concentration in hot cocoa is almost twice as strong as red wine. Cocoa's concentration was two to three times stronger than that of green tea and four to five times stronger than that of black tea.
- Professor Chang Yong Lee, the leader of the Cornell study mentioned above, added that the "hot" in "hot chocolate" is important as well; more antioxidants are released when it's heated up.
- According to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, drinking hot chocolate can help you think better as well. The flavonoids (which also help your body process nitric oxide) increase the blood flow and oxygen to the brain. Since dementia is caused by a reduced flow of blood to the brain, researchers think it could be treated with cocoa.
- Cinnamon is one powerful little spice! It's been shown to treat diabetes, possibly prevent Alzheimer's, reduce blood sugar levels and lower the negative effects of high-fat meals. Cinnamon intake has also been associated with relieving arthritis pain, boosting the body's immune system, preventing the formation of blood clots and relieving indigestion.

As you can see, our beloved fall beverages, our cozy campfire libations, *can* do your body good; you just have to use a bit of creativity—and self-discipline—to imbibe responsibly. Here are a few tips to help you healthily sip the flavors of fall:

1. If at a coffee house, ask your barista for half a pump of the sweetener, since this is the major culprit for excess sugar.
2. Sweeten your beverage with a natural sweetener, such as

Stevia, date sugar or a bit of raw honey. (Find out why I don't include Splenda here.)

3. Leave out whipped cream to save between 50 and 70 calories.

4. Use or ask for nonfat milk instead of the standard 2 percent. If you're lactose intolerant, almond milk makes a wonderful addition as well.

5. If you really want to save calories, order or brew for yourself a hot cup of calorie-free Tazo full-leaf chai tea. It's full of spices your nose and tastebuds will absolutely "fall" for (couldn't help myself): cinnamon, cardamom, cloves and ginger!

6. If you're craving hot chocolate, heat one cup of milk to scalding in a medium saucepan, add half of a vanilla bean (split), and let steep with the heat off for 10 minutes. Strain and return milk to saucepan to reheat milk. (You can use 1/4 teaspoon vanilla extract instead and skip the steeping process.) Whisk in three ounces of semisweet or milk chocolate that's been cut into small pieces until melted and frothy.

7. Another Starbucks alternative is the Caffé Misto; the grande version of this simple steamed, 2-percent milk and brewed coffee combo has just 110 calories and 4 grams of fat. And it can be easily customized with a sprinkle of your favorite spice!

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