

Crazy for coconut? Enjoy it - carefully

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Coconut Oil and Carrot Cake. DON'T FEEL too guilty as you crack open that coconut-cream Easter egg, though you might want to save half for later. After nearly two decades of being considered "forbidden" in a healthy diet, coconut and products made with it are being viewed in a new light by some scientists, health nuts and chefs.

Coconut - be it oil, meat, water or milk - has gone from being a cholesterol criminal to an antiviral, antimicrobial and antifungal "super food."

Monica Glass, dessert chef at 10 Arts Bistro & Lounge by Eric Ripert in the Ritz-Carlton, said she inadvertently stumbled upon coconut oil as a potential cooking fat when Googling cholesterol-friendly recipes about two years ago.

"Coconut oil was showing up in a lot of gluten-free recipes," the West Chester native said. "Bad cholesterol runs in my family, so that was really my main reason for trying it."

Now, Glass said, she frequently uses a tablespoon "here or there" while cooking at home - mainly in granola bars or her favorite gluten-free muffins. "It makes a very good substitute for sautéing carrots or other vegetables, mainly because it can be liquid or sit firmer like butter. If you use enough of it, you can definitely taste the coconut flavor in your baked goods."

Glass said her next venture in the kitchen with coconut oil will be using it as a key ingredient to conquer a gluten-free pie or tart crust.

But neighbors haven't been knocking on doors for a cup of coconut for very long.

The public uproar over coconuts, namely coconut oil, began in the mid-'80s when advertising campaigns funded by the American Soybean Association and the National Health Savers Association brought tropical oils' high levels of saturated fats to light: 86 grams compared with just 36 grams in lard.

The tropical oils terror was further drawn out in the mid-'90s when the Center for Science in the Public Interest released data revealing that most movie theater concession stands popped their corn in coconut oil because of its ability to cook at a high temperature without smoking. A large

tub of popcorn popped in coconut oil, the CSPI said, bulged with nearly 1,600 calories and four days' worth of saturated fat, double that of a serving of fettuccine Alfredo.

But apparently, comparing oils and saturated fats can be like comparing apples and oranges. The refined coconut oil used in those movie theaters in the '90s is not the same as the unprocessed virgin coconut oil found in health food stores today.

Coconut oil that has been hydrogenated, a process that makes liquid fats solid to increase shelf life, contains trans fats, which can compromise cardiovascular health, according to the American Dietetic Association.

While virgin coconut oil is trans-fat free, it contains high levels of saturated fat. But the saturated fats in coconut oil are composed of as much as 57 percent lauric acid, a component also found to be an immunity booster in breast milk. And while lauric acid saturated fats do raise overall cholesterol and low-density lipoproteins, it's not significant enough to make an impact, according to a study released by the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.

In layman's terms, coconut oil is perfectly safe to use in moderation but perhaps to replace other oils rather than being added to the diet.

Denny Waxman, who co-founded Philly natural food store Essene Market in 1969 and has since moved on to health counseling, has seen similar food "scares" and crazes come and go. His brother Howard Waxman owns the 4th Street store now.

"I just like to sit back and watch any time a new super food comes out," Denny Waxman said. "We're always looking for the next 'wonder food,' the next thing that's going to transform us. Whatever it is, it never turns out to be what people thought it was."

Waxman is a longtime practitioner of macrobiotics, a diet that suggests choosing foods indigenous to your or similar climactic zones yields maximum health benefits. So while Waxman prefers sesame and olive oil, he said, coconut oil is not the health villain it had been made out to be.

And for vegans or gluten-free dieters, coconut oil can be a miracle ingredient. With the ability to take on both liquid and solid states depending on its temperature, it's been used to replace butter or other trans-fatty oils. It's also appreciated for its nutty, sweetening flavor.

"The [dietary] purpose of oil is to make food more digestible, absorb minerals, fat-soluble vitamins and calcium," Waxman said. "Cooking with oil steps up the ability to get more energy from food. But whether you're using sesame or olive or coconut oil, we should use it more sparingly than liberally."