



A little protein makes pumpkin pie a lot healthier

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The holiday season just isn't the same if I don't stuff my face with pumpkin pie.

There, I've said it. Judge if you must, but then read on to hear my secret for pumpkin dessert goodness with fewer calories and better nutrition.

First, I make a pumpkin crunch instead of a pumpkin pie. Why? Because while I love the buttery flavor and satisfying texture the crust gives a pie, I've found I can scratch that itch (almost) as well with a cinnamon-laced buttery pecan topping. I make just enough to add the texture and buttery goodness I'm looking for, but hold back just enough to make my waistline happy, too.

Second, let's talk about that pumpkin pie filling - creamy and unctuous, warmed with classic holiday spices. Perfection.

Instead of relying on tons of cream and egg yolks for a smooth texture, I turn to a magical ingredient: silken tofu. Yes, tofu! But be sure to get the silken variety, which usually is sold on shelves, not in the refrigerated section with the Asian produce. Silken tofu brings the creamy with far less fat and fewer calories than cream, and it will thicken the custard beautifully in place of the eggs.

As a bonus, the tofu also boosts the protein. I find that adding a little protein to my sweets keeps the sugar lows at bay.

And the secret behind the secret: a few ounces of light cream cheese. The cream cheese not only adds to the creaminess of the filling, it also lends a slightly tangy flavor, which offsets the ever-so-slight soybean taste that might linger on overly perceptive tongues. (But truth is, my family never notices.)

The recipe says this "pie" feeds eight, but that's just a guideline; I fully support grabbing a spoonful from the leftovers every time you pass through the kitchen.

LIGHTENED PUMPKIN CRUNCH

Start to finish: 1 hour 15 minutes (plus cooling)

Servings: 8

For the filling:

4 ounces light cream cheese (such as Neufchatel), softened

10-ounce package firm silken tofu, rinsed

15-ounce can pumpkin puree



1/2 cup granulated sugar
2 teaspoons pumpkin pie spice blend
1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

For the crunch topping:

1 graham cracker broken into pieces
1/4 cup rolled oats
1/4 cup pecans (halves or pieces)
3 tablespoons packed brown sugar
1/8 teaspoon cinnamon
2 tablespoons butter, cut into small chunks

Heat the oven to 350 F. Coat a 9- or 10-inch pie pan (or a 2 1/2-quart baking dish) with cooking spray.

In a food processor, combine the cream cheese and tofu, then process until smooth, about 30 seconds. Add the pumpkin puree, sugar, pumpkin pie spice, vanilla and salt, then process again. Pour the mixture into the prepared pie pan and bake for 30 minutes.

While the filling bakes, prepare the crunch. Clean the food processor bowl, then in it combine the graham cracker, oats, pecans, brown sugar and cinnamon. Process with several 3-second pulses to reduce the mixture to a coarse meal with some larger chunks. Add the butter and process for another 5 to 10 seconds, or until well incorporated.

After the filling has baked for 30 minutes, sprinkle the crunch topping evenly over it, then return to the oven for another 30 minutes. Cool to room temperature before slicing.

Nutrition information per serving: 200 calories; 90 calories from fat (45 percent of total calories); 10 g fat (4 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 20 mg cholesterol; 23 g carbohydrate; 3 g fiber; 18 g sugar; 5 g protein; 190 mg sodium.