

It's the Great Pumpkin-Pie-Filling Shortage

By Jerry Hirsch

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Pumpkin pie lovers be warned: You may not find your favorite can of pie filling at the supermarket. There's a national shortage of canned pumpkin and pie filling, a result of poor weather that reduced last year's crop.



Shoppers report finding bare shelves, and the supermarkets say they have been put on an "allocation," or quota, system by Libby's, a division of food giant Nestle that controls more than 80% of the canned pumpkin market.

Libby's typically uses surpluses from the previous year to stock store shelves during September and October, when the annual pumpkin harvest gets underway. Wet conditions during last year's growing season left canners without a surplus this year, said Roz O'Hearn, a Libby's spokeswoman. But this year's crop is on its way. "We began shipping Libby's 100% Pure Pumpkin [filling] in late September, so it should be on grocer's shelves soon," she said.

Shoppers could find the filling a bit more expensive this year. Libby's has a suggested retail price of \$1.59 for its 15-ounce can and a suggested price of \$2.59 for its 29-ounce cans of pure pumpkin and pumpkin pie mix. O'Hearn said the prices represented a "small increase" over last year because of higher expenses for the steel that goes into the cans and higher grower costs. She did not provide a percentage increase.

Shortages are obvious at some chains in Southern California, but it depends on the store.

"I went to the Pavilions in Torrance on Wednesday and they were out, so then I went to Hows supermarket and they were out too. I checked the Ralphs in Torrance, and when they were out I knew I really had a problem," said Tara Unverzagt, who eats a crustless pumpkin pie with egg whites for breakfast most days. Unverzagt found some cans at a nearby Sprouts store and a different Ralphs and stocked up. She's also "making puree from fresh pumpkin as long as they're available and saving my cans for after Halloween when the fresh pumpkins go away."

That's a good strategy: Shoppers will find California-grown pumpkins plentiful this year, according to the California Farm Bureau Federation. Growers in the state avoided problems from rain that have slowed production in other parts of the nation, the trade group said. California ranks third in pumpkin production behind Illinois and Pennsylvania.

But shoppers won't be buying the same type of pumpkin that goes into canned filling. Libby's uses what it calls the Select Dickinson pumpkin. It is smaller, squatter, meatier, heavier and sweeter than the typical Halloween pumpkin. The company likes the creamy texture of the pumpkin because it lends itself to cooking.

Supermarkets say they expect to have enough of the canned filling in stock to supply shoppers by the time Thanksgiving approaches. "We're not out today, just low," said Albertsons spokeswoman Stephanie Martin. "We'll be fully stocked for the holidays, which is the high-volume selling period for this product. We have been prepared for this shortage, so we will have the product our customer wants, when they want it, so they can put that pumpkin pie on the table."

Shoppers could confront a similar shortage next year. "It all depends on weather for the remainder of this year's harvest. We have rainy conditions in Morton" -- the Illinois town where Libby's has 5,000 acres of pumpkin fields, O'Hearn said. "Mother Nature rules."

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The gourd, spud mighty as the can

Heather McPherson

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Bad weather, which has yielded poor crops, has induced the canned pumpkin shortage of 2009. But don't cross that pie off the holiday menu yet. My colleague Jerry Hirsch at the Los Angeles Times talked to the folks who make the Libby brand product and they explained the blip:

Libby's uses surpluses to stock stores in "September and October, when the annual pumpkin harvest is underway." But last year's wet conditions dampened that harvest so there was no surplus, according to Roz O'Hearn, a Libby spokeswoman.

This year's harvest is on and product is being shipped to stores. So let's declare a little Heather's Rules of Order here. Buy what you need and no hoarding. There will be plenty to go around. How many Halloweens and Thanksgivings have there been when you discovered a cupboard surplus of seasonal canned goods when the last holly jolly occurred? I'd wager too many.

But if you find yourself staring at an empty shelf, don't panic. There are swell substitutes readily available for pies, sauces and the like.

Try cooked butternut squash, drained and rinsed mashed canned yams, cooked calabazas, mashed cooked carrots and - my favorite - the sweet potato. These spuds make a mighty fine pie.

The one thing you don't want to do is use the meat from that behemoth you cut into a scary face for Halloween. While the seeds are good for roasting, Mother Nature bestowed a rather savory, dry flesh to these Jack-O-Lanterns. Getting them pie-filling sweet and scented properly with nutmeg, allspice and cinnamon is not worth the work.

Libbey's uses the select Dickinson pumpkin for its solid-pack and pie filling products. These squat orange orbs are related to the small pie pumpkins you often see in supermarkets. Those varieties have a creamier texture when baked and lend themselves nicely to recipes.

In Other Florida Food News:

Fresh from Florida: More home-grown produce is coming to market. Look for good supplies of avocados, cucumbers, grapefruit, okra, oranges, sweet corn, tangerines and tomatoes. At the fresh fish and seafood counter look for amberjack, clams, blue crab, flounder, red grouper, spiny lobster, mahi mahi, oysters, shrimp, red snapper, yellowtail snapper, swordfish, yellowfin tuna and alligator.

Connect with eco-conscious cooks: Slow Food Orlando is having a Thanksgiving potluck at 7 p.m. Nov. 17 at Harmoni Market, 2305 Edgewater Drive, Orlando (College Park). Cost is free with a dish or \$3 for chapter members, \$8 for nonmembers. To join, check out the Web site slowfoodorlando.org.

Road trip!: Nov. 6-8, the Sebastian Clambake Lagoon Festival celebrates Florida farm-raised clams with educational exhibits, entertainment and plenty of seafood. Go to sebastianclambake.org for details.