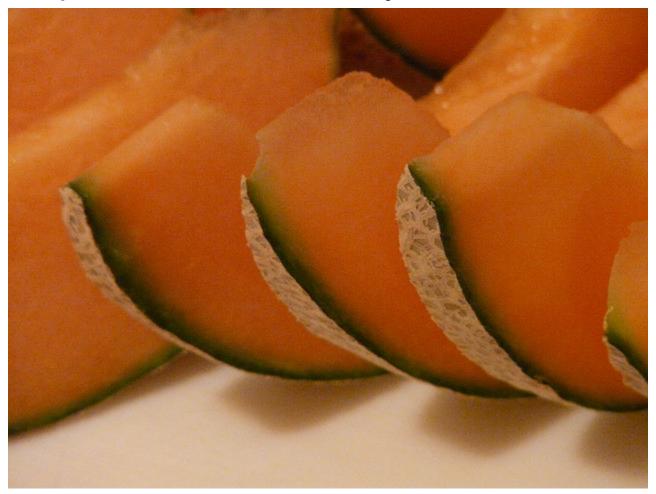


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Cantaloupe Offers More Than Sweet Juicy Refreshment



Some say cantaloupe and some say muskmelon. Whatever you call this pungent, juicy fruit, the fact is this is one healthy food! Cantaloupe is the perfect snack for adults and kids, and adding this fruit to your diet has definite benefits, besides just being tasty.

What is it?

Cantaloupe is part of the melon family which includes squash, cucumber, gourds, and pumpkin. In America, we know cantaloupe by its rib-textured outer skin. When you slice a cantaloupe in half, you'll find a pocket of seeds and soft threads. Scoop this out and you'll be ready to enjoy the sweet, juicy orange color flesh with its distinctive flavor and aroma.

Grown on vines, this fruit is ripe when the stem begins to separate easily from the cantaloupe itself. Because the aroma of the cantaloupe is so distinctive, many people say it is quite simple to tell if the fruit is ripe. If it smells ripe, it is ripe.

History

Christopher Columbus is credited with introducing cantaloupes to America during his second voyage to the continent in the late 15th Century. This North American cantaloupe with its familiar orange flesh is the variety we are most familiar with in America. This differs from the European cantaloupe, which has an outer rind of a gray-green color and is smooth instead of ribbed.

Long before North America was introduced to cantaloupe, Africans, Egyptians, Romans, and Greeks grew the fruit in their native lands. The varieties differed just as much as the regions, but it was all cantaloupe.

Health Benefits

Like many healthy fruits, cantaloupes are rich in vitamin C and contain antioxidants that help promote good cardiovascular health and better immunity. Cantaloupe also contains beta-carotene, a rich source of vitamin A which reduces the risk of cataracts and promotes eye health.

These vitamins also help limit the damage caused by free-radicals. We can't forget about the cantaloupe's healthy dose of B-complex vitamins which are known to help regulate blood sugar levels by processing carbs slowly, over a longer period of time.

Fun Facts

The name "cantaloupe" is derived from an Italian village called Cantalup, which was among the first places where the fruit was cultivated around the year 1700. However, this is known by a few other names in different parts of the world.

Persians and Armenians know this fruit as part of a group of muskmelons that include honeydew, casaba, and crenshaw varieties. South Africans refer to them as spanspeks. Australians call cantaloupe rockmelons.

How to Eat

Most people enjoy fresh cantaloupe raw, on its own, savoring the juicy, rich texture and flavor as a snack or dessert. However, because cantaloupe is so flavorful and appealing, many find it a fun food to experiment with in order to serve in new ways. One interesting serving suggestion is to wrap cantaloupe chunks in thinly cut prosciutto slices for a tasty and eye-pleasing appetizer.

Cantaloupe also goes well with yogurt and mixed with other fruits in sweet salads. You can even make a cold soup by blending other fruits like apples, peaches, and strawberries with cantaloupe together in a cold puree. Cantaloupe also makes a great sweet bread with just the right spices, nuts, and spices like ginger and cinnamon. Slushies and smoothies are another popular way to serve this tantalizing fruit.

Something to keep in mind is that cantaloupes have a short lifespan. Since the surface of the outer rind is so rough, it can harbor bacteria, particularly Salmonella. For this reason, it is important to wash cantaloupes well before cutting them open. Try to eat your cantaloupe within three days of purchase to reduce this bacterial risk.

The unmistakably sweet taste of ripe cantaloupe make this one fruit that is easy to enjoy. For those of us with a sense of culinary adventure, there's a world of interesting recipes waiting for you to explore with this popular seasonal fruit.

Chard Packs A Nutritious Punch In A Colorful Package



You may know chard by a number of different names, like swiss chard, spinach beet, mangold, or silverbeet. But no matter what you call it, chard is a delicious and very nutritious green. It has a wealth of nutrients and over a dozen antioxidants, making it one of the best leafy vegetables for healthy diets.

What is it?

Chard is a cousin of the beet. However, only the stalks and leaves of chard are edible, even though, like beets, they have a bulb that grows beneath the surface of the ground.

The green leaves are saturated with a deep red and white tint. The stalks of the chard plant can range in color between orange, white, red, and yellow. A variety of chard can sometimes be found packaged together as rainbow chard.

History

Ancient Greeks and Romans used chard for medicinal purposes as early as the fourth century B.C. It is native to the Mediterranean region, found mostly in Italy, France, and Spain, but is now also grown in America.

The word Swiss was added to the word chard by 19th century seed catalogs to help distinguish this vegetable from the French spinach varieties.

Health Benefits

Chard is considered one of the world's healthiest vegetables for several reasons. It has at least thirteen known antioxidants, including syringic acid, which helps regulate blood sugar levels, and kaempferol, known for its ability to benefit cardiovascular health. The stems and veins of the plant also have nutrients called betalains that help reduce inflammation and detoxify the body.

As if that's not enough, chard is an excellent source of vitamins K, A, and C, as well as a long list of nutrients that includes, calcium, iron, zinc, and phosphorus. Chard is also low in fat and cholesterol, and contains protein and dietary fiber. This very common green leafy vegetable is actually quite unique for its arsenal of healthy benefits.

Fun Facts

The word "chard" actually comes from the Latin word carduus which means thistle. As this "carduus" was being heavily cultivated in France, the word evolved into the French word "carde" which in English evolved into "chard"

Another source indicates that the word "chard" was adopted by the French in order to distinguish it from a similar celery-like vegetable called cardoon. No matter what you call it, chard certainly has developed somewhat of an identity crisis.

How to Eat

Like many other leafy greens like kale and spinach, chard can be sautéed, grilled, roasted, or steamed as a side dish of its own or as an ingredient in casseroles mixed with rice, quinoa, or pasta. You can eat the younger plants raw, but it has somewhat of a bitter taste that may be too harsh-tasting for most people.

Lots of Mediterranean dishes feature chard as part of the recipe. If stored properly in the refrigerator, chard can last up to two weeks. One of the best ways to cook chard is to boil it in a similar way you would other greens, making a traditional Southern dish that has a long history in America. Another simple recipe is to saute quickly in a skillet and toss it with some lemon juice, olive oil, and garlic.

Vegetarians frequently use chard in recipes, and one healthy idea is to create a spicy vegetable tart pie using tofu, egg whites, mushrooms, and a crust made from various seeds and walnuts.

During the peak season for chard, stock up and try adding this green to soups, pasta, quiche and other baked vegetable and cheese dishes. The nutritional benefits are incredible and you'll be enjoying a time-honored member of the family of greens!

Cherries Brighten The Table And Gladden The Heart



The song says "life is just a bowl of cherries." If that's true, you can count me in! Cherries are one of the tastiest fruits you'll ever find, and one of the prettiest when placed in a bowl on a table. So, fill a bowl and check out what cherries have in store for your life.

What is it?

Cherries are part of the agricultural family that includes plums, apricots, and peaches. Like their cousins, cherries have a stone pit in the center, but because of their smaller size, these pits cause a bit more consternation. This has inspired many inventors to design mechanical cherry pitting tools.

You'll find cherries in the stores year-round, pitted and unpitted, canned and frozen, so you can enjoy eating them just about anytime in a number of savory and sweet recipes. Not only are cherries delicious and very snack-worthy, many people enjoy them for their health benefits as well. This little dynamo contains powerful antioxidants and healthy benefits for cardiovascular wellness.

History

Cherries have been cultivated since prehistoric times, making it one of the oldest known fruits in existence. Cherry trees are native to parts of Asia and Europe. However, Greek, Roman, and Egyptian civilizations knew the fruit, as well.

At least one species of cherry trees was well established in America by the time the colonists arrived. Today, four states contribute 90% of the world's cherry crop. Of the more than 1,000 varieties of cherry trees, only 10 are commercially produced for consumers.

Health Benefits

Cherries are a great source of potassium and vitamin C, but their biggest benefit is from a specific antioxidant called anthocyanins, which also gives the fruit its rich red pigment. These anthocyanins have been shown to reduce pain and inflammation in scientific studies, which in turn reduces the risk for high cholesterol, heart disease, and excess belly fat.

Other research suggests that cherries ease painful symptoms of conditions such as gout and arthritis. One particular study by an Oregon university pointed to less muscle pain in runners who participated in a long-distance relay after consuming cherry juice for the week before the race. This is a tasty trial that I know many runners wouldn't object to participating in.

Fun Facts

One of the more expensive varieties of cherry is the Rainer cherry. The reason for this is because, in general, cherries are a favorite of birds. In the case of the Rainer cherry, the birds consume most of the season's harvest before they have a chance to be picked for commercial sale, thus creating a shortage which creates a higher price tag. Cherry trees also provide food for several species of caterpillars, so you can see that when a bowl of cherries graces our table, it's dodged a lot of obstacles to get there.

Cherry trees are classified as part of the rose family. As such, cherry leaves are poisonous, unlike the fruit itself. It takes about five years before a cherry tree matures enough for the first harvest. It's estimated that the average American household consumes about five pounds of cherries each year, and each cherry tree produces enough cherries to bake almost thirty pies.

How to Eat

Fresh cherries have a short shelf life of just four days in a refrigerator, so they must be consumed quickly or frozen as soon as possible. Freezing them quickly if not consumed fresh also retains the full benefit of the antioxidants and nutrients in the fruit. Like other highly-perishable fruit such as blueberries, cherries should not be washed until you're ready to eat them.

The moisture that inevitably stays trapped in the packaging and on the fruit is bacteria's best friend.

Cherries can be snacked on as is or used in any number of recipes for a tart, fresh flavor from nature. They make great additions to breakfast foods like cereal, oatmeal, pancakes, and yogurt. You can also find dried cherries, perfect for including in meat or green salads, or with a number of pasta and rice dishes.

If you buy concentrated cherry juice, you can create some exciting smoothies and spritzers for a mid-day treat or evening cooler. Of course the dessert possibilities for cherries are well known. You'll want to give cherries a try in pies, muffins, cakes, cookies, compotes, and much more. And who hasn't indulged in a chocolate covered cherry at some point in their life?

Cherries are another of the super-foods highly recommended by nutritionists for healthy benefits. A quick search for recipes will quickly introduce you to new ways to enjoy these old time favorites which have gained in popularity again. Life is just a bowl of cherries when you include these tart morsels in your meal plan.

Coconut Cracks The Code For A Tasty Tropical Fruit



Perhaps you have enjoyed shredded coconut through the years in cookies or other desserts. But, did you know this sweet treat can be enjoyed in so many other ways? Coconut is nutritious as well as delicious. Take a look at some of the delightful surprises this fruit, or nut if you wish, has for you.

What is it?

Coconuts are a member of the palm tree family, and grow in tropical climates closer to the equator, in both hemispheres of the world. They are cultivated in over 80 countries within these regions. Coconuts have several layers, and the exterior shell is a hard, fiber-like membrane that requires a sharp knife and a little work to crack.

This fruit is officially classified as a fibrous one-seeded drupe. Now, most people (unless you're a botanist) have never heard of a "drupe." A drupe is a fruit that has what we would call a "pit" which is nothing more than a hard cover that encloses the seed, like a peach or an olive. Drupes, including coconuts, have three layers which we must navigate through to enjoy what the coconut has to offer.

History

The origin of the coconut seems to be debated a bit. One palm specialist has suggested that the coconut most likely came from the Indian Archipelago or Polynesia, using one argument that there are more varieties of coconut palms in the Eastern hemisphere than in the Americas. Other scientists argue that the coconut origins can be traced to the Americas and migrated westward across the Pacific.

Portugal and Spain are the two countries that first documented seeing coconuts during the mid 16th century, describing them as resembling the faces of monkeys. Although most often associated with the Pacific islands and southern Asia in movies, art, and historical depictions, coconuts do grow in extreme southern areas of Florida, California, Hawaii, and the Caribbean.

Health Benefits

Coconut has been credited with everything from improving hair and skin quality to easing symptoms of menopause, diarrhea, and even helping wounds heal faster. Coconut's most significant quality is to aid digestion and maintain a healthy pH balance in the intestines and lessen the amount of toxin build-up.

One of the healthiest oils you can consume is coconut oil, having much less trans fat, resulting in better benefits from the Omega-3 fatty acids the oil contains. Even though the plant is high in saturated fat, it is said to help lower cholesterol and the risk for heart disease, as well as provide a natural energy boost and help people maintain a healthy body weight.

It is also believed that coconut contains lauric acid, which helps the immune system by fighting off viral, fungal, and bacterial agents in the body. Coconut milk is another way to enjoy the health benefits of this tropical treat. Many people have found the benefits of switching from other milks to coconut milk for their own particular health needs.

Fun Facts

Some countries, Malaysia and Thailand for example, train macaque monkeys to harvest coconuts much faster than humans can. In India, this plant is sacred, and is used in ceremonies as a sign of great respect for its healing qualities and its ability to reduce stress and eliminate toxins from the body.

Coconuts are referred to as the "tree of life" because every bit of the fruit is used to produce a wealth of products such as drink, food, fiber, fuel, utensils, musical instruments, and much more. As a matter of fact, coconut water was used successfully during World War II and Vietnam as a substitute intravenous solution due to wartime shortages.

How to Eat

If you are lucky enough to get a real whole coconut, you may think it's a "touch nut to crack" but it's a lot easier than you might think once you know how. Look for the three dots resembling a face. Take a sharp object, like a meat thermometer or screwdriver, and poke the holes until you find the soft one, then push it all the way in and drain the water into a glass; taste to make sure it's sweet (not oily or sour, which then you would throw the whole thing out.)

If the liquid is sweet, proceed to crack the nut by first putting in a 400 degree oven for 15 minutes. When you remove it, you'll see the hard shell has cracked. Get out a hammer and smack the coconut until it splits open. Remove the shell and peel away the brown skin attached to the white meat with a vegetable peeler. You're ready to enjoy!

The coconut meat can be shredded, shaved, or diced and is most often thought of in desserts like macaroons, cookies, pies, and cupcakes. But, don't stop there! Coconut is a wonderful addition to many main dishes and sides, as well. Add shredded coconut to breading to coat shrimp, for instance. Shred, shave, or grate fresh coconut to dress up many types of salads, including green salads, rice, and quinoa. The bulk of recipes for this tropical plant are the many delicious baked desserts and sweet breads, but use your imagination to expand your use of coconut.

The uses for coconut milk are growing in popularity every day. Combine the milk with ingredients like raisins, cranberries, brown sugar, and cinnamon to create a tasty basmati rice or brown rice pudding recipe. For meat, chicken, or other main dishes, make a spicy curry with coconut cream or milk. Turn to any Thai recipe for ways to use up your coconut milk, whether poured right from the coconut itself or purchased as processed milk.

Whether you purchase a fresh coconut or processed products made from this tropical plant, you can add a bit of healthy sweetness to your diet by exploring the many recipes for this unique fruit, nut, or whatever you call it. With a little creativity, you'll find lots of new ways to use this "tough nut" and be happy you finally cracked the coconut code!

Collard Greens Are The Quintessential Southern Cuisine



When you think Southern cooking, you can't think too long before considering collard greens. This staple of the Southern diet has a long history and many fans who have perfected cooking their "collards" for generations. Let's take a little closer look at what makes these leafy greens so special.

What is it?

Collards belong to the cabbage family of leafy vegetables which, depending on the climate, can be a perennial or biennial plant. The edible leaves have a slightly bitter taste, and are best when picked small and before they are fully mature.

Even though collard greens are available all year long, they are actually at their peak in the colder months. These greens have taken a strong hold on the Southern culture of the United States, and found their way into homes for generations, much like other greens such as mustard, chard, turnip, and kale. And, collards are actually found in many other regions around the world.

History

Ancient Romans and Greeks grew and ate collard greens as early as the 4th century B.C. The American use of collards began when African slaves brought their knowledge of creating meals from the green tops of vegetables to the colonies. Often forced to use whatever leftovers they could find after the meal was made for the "big house," these slaves learned to boil up the tossed-aside green tops of the vegetables they prepared.

Slow cooking with a mixture of greens, pig's feet, or ham hocks yielded a much needed meal. The juice left from cooking greens, sometimes called pot likker, or pot liquor depending on your region, was also consumed.

As these recipes started to make their way out of the slave quarters and into the plantation kitchens, the recipes were expanded and shared in what now has become a solid Southern tradition of "soul food." But this leafy green is just as well known in Brazil, Portugal, and the Kashmir region and is so nourishing that it is considered a mainstay in these areas just as it is in America's South.

Health Benefits

Collards are known for having the best ability to bind bile acids in the digestive tract for easy consumption, thereby reducing cholesterol levels in the entire body. Cooking or steaming the greens is a much better way to produce this benefit than eating raw greens. And the taste is also improved in the cooking by most people's standards.

Whenever we talk about collard greens, we have to mention the four compounds called glucosinolates. These compounds offer protection against cancer by helping detoxify and reduce inflammation in the body. Like other cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, and bok choy, these benefits make collards a highly-recommended part of healthy diets.

Fun Facts

The state of South Carolina, the second largest producer of collards, attempted to pass a bill to make collards the official Leafy Green of the state. Many people who enjoy "soul food" along with the heritage that comes along with this African-American tradition, appreciate the idea of levitating this common green to higher status. The word "collards" is derived from the word "collewort" or "cabbage plant."

In the Southern states, when a family cooks up a big pot of greens of any variety, it is lovingly referred to as a "mess of greens." The actual distinction between a pot of greens and a mess of greens all depends on the size and tradition of the family. A New Year's tradition calls for the consumption of collards and black-eyed peas to bring good luck and a prosperous year. You might also use collard greens to do everything from curing headaches to warding off evil spirits.

How to Eat

Traditionally, collards are boiled or simmered with ham, pork, or bacon, or any salty or cured meat, and often served with cornbread to complete a true Southern-style dish. Often you'll find a jar of hot sauce or pepper sauce alongside for those who feel adventurous.

The greens make a great addition to brown rice, white rice, potatoes, pasta and quinoa. Using a flavored stock with these combinations will add a richness to the dish. Collards can also be sautéed with onions and oil or bacon grease. You may like to add a bit of brown sugar or even apple cider vinegar to kick up the flavor.

In Portugal, a popular soup called Caldo Verde (green broth) is served made with collards or kale along with potatoes and onions. This soup is often served during weddings and other celebrations.

Collards are an important part of American heritage, but also around the world, and the ancient civilizations that enjoyed them are a testament to their longevity in our culinary history. These simple greens have dressed-up tables and warmed-up bellies for generations of families who learned that cooking sometimes meant inventing delicious filling dishes from what we gathered, foraged, and cultivated.

Corn Offers More Than A Summer Vegetable Staple



No other vegetable brings up the memory of summer and warm weather fun like corn. An ear of corn buttered and seasoned to your liking is just the right thing to get you in the mood for a picnic. But, there is more to corn than that summer favorite. Let's take a closer look at some of corn's better qualities and characteristics.

What is it?

Corn is the well-recognized product of stalks growing tall in vast fields that reach the horizon. The layers of broad leaves are the germinating environment for the ears themselves, and as the corn grows inside this cocoon, male and female flowers mature and release pollen as the entire plant matures.

In the United States, corn is the leading field crop by a two-to-one margin. We know what corn on the cob looks like. But, this summer picnic staple has a bigger audience than that. Corn is used to produce everything from fuel alcohol for a cleaner burning gasoline, to butters, cereals, soft drinks, and snack foods. It is also grown as feed for livestock.

History

Corn or "maize" has been grown since prehistoric times by some of the earliest civilizations in our world's history. Mayan and Olmec cultures were among the first to cultivate corn in the southern part of Mexico, and the crop began to spread through the Americas by the year 1700 B.C.

When Europeans began to travel to and settle in the Americas, they traded corn with their mother country, and corn began to be a well-known staple of diets around the world. Today, corn is produced on every continent in the world except Antarctica.

Health Benefits

Corn's most significant contributions for our health is as a source of vitamins B1, B5, and C, as well as folate, manganese, phosphorus, and dietary fiber. Folate helps reduce the risk of birth defects, heart attack and colon cancer. The B vitamins support memory function which can reduce the onset of Alzheimer's Disease.

A diet rich in whole grains, such as the grain processed from dried corn, (cornmeal and cereals, for instance) is also generally assumed to have phytonutrients to ward off disease to our organs and vital tissues. Research has also shown that eating sweet corn can support the growth of friendly bacteria in the large intestine which can help lower the risk of colon cancer. Eating corn has been long believed to add much needed fiber to our diet. That fiber can come from eating sweet corn or cornmeal.

Fun Facts

You can get creative with corn. Of course, dried cornstalks are often bundled and used to decorate homes and businesses during the fall. Also, a corncob can be treated and hollowed out to make pipes for smoking. Some farmers plant varieties of corn that grow very tall in order to create mazes for the sake of entertainment.

Scientifically speaking, the name for corn is "zea mays" which leads us to the word "maize," the traditional name by which the Native Americans called this crop. However, many cultures throughout the world have cultivated corn and called it by a variation of the word. The colors of corn may surprise you. We normally see sweet corn on the table in shades of yellow, but corn is grown in a variety of colors which include red, purple, blue, and even pink. Some of this corn is strictly ornamental, but some is edible, too.

How to Eat

Choosing a fresh ear of corn means choosing ears that have green husks that are not dried out. You can check the freshness of individual kernels by pressing on them with a fingernail. The freshest corn will emit a milky, white fluid that indicates the corn is at its peak of sweetness and flavor. The husks protect the corn, so they should only be removed when you're ready to eat the ears you've purchased. I know many stores husk the corn, trim it, and wrap it in plastic.

If that's your only option, that's fine, but look for corn that is still in the husk for optimum freshness and sweetness

The most common variety of corn is either the yellow sweet corn or the white and yellow combination colored sweet corn. You may find a variety of colors in your region, including black, blue, and violet. These darker varieties generally contain more antioxidants and protein levels and less starch than lighter color specimens. If you can't find fresh ears of dark colored corn, check out the blue corn chips. These are increasingly popular and make a beautiful, and nutritious, snack.

Frozen whole kernel sweet corn is your next best choice after corn on the cob. The corn is picked ripe, then quickly removed from the cob, blanched and flash frozen. The quality may often surpass fresh corn toward the end of the season.

There are a number of delicious cold salads you can make with corn. You'll also find corn adds a wonderful filling taste and texture to many soups, chili, and casseroles. And don't forget the corn products, like cornmeal, cornflour, cereals, and other dried corn ingredients we can cook with.

If you are a grilling fanatic, be sure to add corn to your menu. Just remove the silk, keep the husks wrapped tightly and soak in cold water. Remove and place on low grill on indirect heat until you can smell the sweet corn aroma. Remove and baste with seasoned butter for even more savory goodness.

It's no wonder corn is such a mainstay in our diet. With so much versatility, nutrition, and deliciousness, corn is going to be around for a long time.

Cranberries Corner The Market On Creative Nutrition



Many of us recognize cranberries around Thanksgiving time as that sweet-tart relish we enjoy alongside our turkey. Or maybe we slide prepared cranberry sauce out of a can or stir them into a quick bread for a tasty treat. This versatile fruit, or berry, has many healthy advantages as well as delicious options for serving. Let's take a look at what cranberries have to offer us.

What is it?

Cranberries grow on creeping shrubs or bushes in the Northern Hemisphere, particular in cooler climates. You'll see this abundant crop often grown in bog conditions in areas of Canada and the Northern United States. The berries are most often cultivated for sauces, juice, and dried fruit for consumers, as well as fresh. Cranberries are currently enjoying super-food status due to awareness of the healthy qualities they possess.

Growing cranberries in bogs, and flooding those bogs for harvest, has several advantages. At first, it was believed only that the harvesting was easier when the cranberries floated on the water, but more research has shown that cranberries floating in bogs receive more sunlight than in other methods, and the antioxidants in the berries are boosted by the additional sunshine.

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