Feast on these pumpkin picks

It’s almost Thanksgiving, and guess what that means … pumpkin!! Either you love it or you hate it, and I love it. Just as much as I love candy corn and peanuts, which I love a lot. (You have to find something to love in the fall since the weather gets all gloomy and the sun goes away and all the leaves fall off the trees and it’s just plain depressing!)

OK, back to pumpkins. I’m so excited about pumpkins that I looked up some nifty pumpkin facts for you on trusty history.com. Did you know pumpkins are indigenous to the western hemisphere? They are members of the gourd family, which includes cucumbers, honeydew melons, cantaloupe, watermelons and zucchini—all native to Central America and Mexico but are now grown on six continents.

In 1584, after French explorer Jacques Cartier explored the St. Lawrence region of North America, he reported finding “gros melons.” The name was translated into English as “pompions,” which has since evolved into the modern “pumpkin.” (Or “punkin,” as I like to say.)

This orange fruit has flowers, seeds and flesh that are edible. You'll be excited to know pumpkins are low in calories, fat and sodium and are high in fiber. They are good sources of Vitamin A, Vitamin B, potassium, protein and iron. Bring on the pumpkin pie!!

And speaking of pumpkin pie, seven years ago some intense pumpkin lovers baked the largest pumpkin pie in the world, weighing in at a whopping 2,020 pounds. If that couldn't feed the pilgrims and the Native Americans on the first Thanksgiving, I don't know what could!!

I think we love pumpkin so much because we know we can only get it once a year. Therefore, it's pretty much a crime to not have pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving, don't you think? You don't want to blow your chances for pumpkin pie, because the opportunity might not come back around for another 365 days, and that's a long time!

My pumpkin cravings have been hitting hard this year, so the other day I popped open a can of pumpkin and whipped up my sister's favorite pumpkin bar recipe. It can be found on foodnetwork.com, courtesy of Paula Dean.

These pumpkin bars are like pumpkin pie, but better. Way better. Like I-must-be-in-pumpkin-heaven better. You'll just have to try them for yourself. And trust me, this is one dish you'll have to make a permanent part of your Thanksgiving menu. You'll be thankful you did!

Pumpkin Gooey Butter Cakes

Cake:

1 (18 1/4-ounce) package yellow cake mix
1 egg
8 tablespoons butter, melted

Filling:
1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, softened
1 (15-ounce) can pumpkin
3 eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla
8 tablespoons butter, melted
1 (16-ounce) box powdered sugar
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1 teaspoon nutmeg

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Combine the cake mix, egg and butter and mix well with an electric mixer. Pat the mixture into the bottom of a lightly greased 13 by 9-inch baking pan.

To make the filling: In a large bowl, beat the cream cheese and pumpkin until smooth. Add the eggs, vanilla and butter and beat together. Next, add the powdered sugar, cinnamon and nutmeg and mix well. Spread pumpkin mixture over cake batter and bake for 40-50 minutes. Make sure not to overbake as the center should be a little gooey. Serve with fresh whipped cream.

Variations: For a Pineapple Gooey Cake: Instead of the pumpkin, add a drained 20-ounce can of crushed pineapple to the cream cheese filling. Proceed as directed above.

For a Banana Gooey Cake: Prepare cream cheese filling as directed, beating in 2 ripe bananas instead of the pumpkin. Proceed as directed above.

For a Peanut Butter Gooey Cake: Use a chocolate cake mix. Add 1 cup creamy peanut butter to the cream cheese filling instead of the pumpkin. Proceed as directed above.

Holyoke Enterprise November 1, 2012