About – The consumption of numerous species of wild strawberries has been documented as early as 234 B.C., but it wasn't until a chance marriage of strawberries brought back to France from Virginia and Chile in the early 1700s that the modern strawberry was born. Today, the United States is the world leader in strawberry production, accounting for 20% of the total commercial crop. While strawberries are grown in every state, California leads the way in production supplying over 88% of the nation's needs. Typically, the California season runs from late January through November, peaking in April and May. Florida, the second leading producer, supplies us with berries from December through April with their peak coming in March. We also import fruit from Central America during the winter months to meet the demand for fresh fruit.

Strawberries are a member of the rose family. They have the unique distinction of being the only fruit with the seeds on the outside. Strawberries have come a long way since that marriage in France some 250 years ago. Horticulturalists have continually worked to develop varieties that are resistant to insects, rain and drought; varieties that grow larger, more red and are more flavorful; and varieties that can sustain the transit times to get them to markets around the country and the world. It's no wonder that today over 94% of the households in the United States consume strawberries with average annual consumption at 5 pounds per person.

Selection – When purchasing strawberries, you should look for bright red fruit that has fresh green leaves or calyx. Strawberries do not ripen once they are picked, so avoid berries that are very pale or are excessively white around the calyx. The berries should be free of bruises and mold. While some markets may still sell strawberries that are bulk, the vast majority of strawberries purchased in this country are field packed in plastic containers ready for sale. These containers come in a variety of sizes ranging from 8 ounces to 4 pounds. Also available are special containers that are carefully packed with very large berries that have long stems attached for dipping. Strawberries bruise very easily, so even though they are in a protective container, they should always be handled with care.

Storage – With an optimal storage temperature of 32 to 36 degrees, strawberries should be refrigerated as soon as possible after purchase. Place them in the coldest part of your refrigerator keeping them away from any moisture. Strawberries should be consumed as soon as possible after purchasing - within 2 to 3 days maximum.

Preparation and Uses – Never wash strawberries until just prior to use. Rinse the berries in a gentle stream of cold water and remove the calyx by cutting around it with a small paring knife. The uses of strawberries are many - cakes, pies, and cheesecakes; smoothies and various beverages; jams and preserves; and in a fresh fruit salad or topping a bowl of your favorite cereal - to name just a few. Of course, eating out of hand or dipping in chocolate or cream sauce is always a hit.

Nutrition – Strawberries pack a real nutritional punch. They are high in vitamin C (140% of the RDA), contain folate and potassium and are in low calories (45) with no fat or cholesterol. A single one-cup serving of strawberries also provides 12% of the RDA for fiber. But the real nutritional benefit comes from the high concentrations of antioxidants such as anthocyanin and ellagic acid that help reduce the risk of heart attacks. They're great tasting and great for you - a winning combination.

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