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The Mythic Nopal Cactus Is Our New Favorite Edible

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By: **Nora Mueller** | March 1, 2016

Though it's often used in high-end beauty products to combat aging, prickly pear still grows as a weed in much of the Southwest, materializing unexpectedly along roadsides and in front yards. Its spiny pads



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be found across deserts in the Southwest, Mexico, and South America- and it also grows invasively in Australia, the Indo-Pacific, and East Africa.

The term “prickly pear” is something of a misnomer, as it refers to both the plant itself, and the plant’s fruit. In Spanish, *nopal* refers to the plant in general, while *cladodes* identifies the pads of the plant-green, flat, and with thin white spikes. Prickly pear (*tuna* in Spanish) specifically invokes the rounded fruit, which can be yellow, red, or purple, and bears the same thin white spikes. The term ‘prickly pear’ in English additionally refers to a number of species within the *Opuntia* genus. In general, when people refer to prickly pear, they are speaking of the plant officially known as Indian fig opuntia.

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was one of the original super fruits; the Aztecs boiled the juice of its pads to cure fevers, used its slime as lip balm, its pulp to remedy diarrhea, its spines to combat infections, and its fruit to lessen anger. Symbolically, the redness of the fruits was likened to the hearts of warriors—people believed eating them would imbue them with strength and power.



Nopal Green Smoothie

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Aztec Empire and the site of its final demise at the hands of the Spanish— was named “prickly pear on a rock.” According to legend, the city was built after an Aztec priest spotted an eagle perched on a nopal plant, carrying a snake in its mouth. The priest hurried back to tell the nearby camp of settlers of the promising portent, bringing everyone back with him to see the eagle. As they watched, the cactus



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perched on a nopal growing from a rock, can now be found on the Mexican coat of arms.



Today, modern science has measured and quantified the medical power of nopal, identifying its ability to aid in treating hypoglykemia, diabetes, high blood cholesterol, and obesity. In addition to its medicinal properties, the plant and fruit are used as cattle

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walls more water resistant. Recent experiments have also discovered a more futuristic incarnation for nopal, including the finding that prickly pear dye can be used in holographic recording materials.

In addition to the value found in the plant itself, the cochineal- an insect long used to color food and



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renowned not just among mortals), that they went so far as to shed one another's blood. As the divine drops fell on the nopal, they turned into the cochineal, giving the bug its rich, startlingly bright color.



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Rich in history, mythology, and practical uses, the nopal's enduring popularity is a testament to its versatility. It can be eaten raw, sautéed, pickled, grilled- it's even used as a pizza topping. Below is our favorite way to prepare nopal- easy, and in a form Lil'



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and should be treated with care), nopal is a easy ingredient to incorporate, one sure to become a familiar and welcome kitchen guest.

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