

Cook's corner

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Packing a nutritional punch

High in protein and essential fatty acids, hemp can be easily incorporated into diets

Ruth Shamaï calls it the vegetarian egg. For something so small, it sure packs a nutritional punch.

Shamaï, a Toronto resident and the president of Ruth's Hemp Foods Inc., said the hemp seed offers a number of good-for-your-health qualities.

"I call it a vegetarian egg because it has what eggs have, both the fat and the protein, but no cholesterol because it's vegan."

In fact the hemp seed has five grams of protein per tablespoon and contains Omega 3, 6 and 9, the essential fatty acids. It also has GLA, which is a rare fatty acid.

While the entire hemp seed, shell and all, can be eaten, the nutritional value is found in the seed itself.

"The interior, that's the very nutritious part."

Hemp for food (seed and oil) and textiles (clothing and rope) was legalized again in 1998 (it was legal earlier in Canadian history, but the government made it illegal in the 1930s), thanks to the work of Shamaï who saw the health benefits of the plant as well as the environmental aspects (producing and buying locally) and the economic benefits (creating a textile market so money stays in Canada).

When Shamaï incorporated her company in 1999, launching the first of her products (tortilla chips) a year later, she was at the forefront of a new food trend and spent time informing the public of the difference between marijuana, the drug, and hemp, the food source.

While consumers are more knowledgeable about hemp now, and its differences from marijuana, some myths still remain. One of which is no, you can't get high from eating the seeds.

"It's the same species, different variety," Shamaï explained about the differences between the two plants. "It's like a chihuahua and a great dane. No matter what you

feed a chihuahua, it won't turn into a great dane."

The biggest difference between the two plants is the amount of THC, the chemical that causes a high, found in each. In marijuana, THC is up to 25 per cent, while the THC allowable in food is 10 parts per million.

"In other words, there is no high."

The hemp food industry is monitored, with government officials coming right to the fields.

Hemp and marijuana plants look similar, but are grown differently. Marijuana plants can get about 10 to 15 feet tall, but then all the plant's energy is used to increase its size. Hemp plants are grown low and bushy and spend their energy creating seeds, which are harvested and processed for various purposes.

Shamaï said an organic farmer can get about 1,000 pounds of hemp seeds per acre. In Canada, farmers can only get one harvest a season.

Hemp seeds can be purchased in packages and eaten straight up; Shamaï said the taste is similar to a pine nut. They can also be tossed on salads, put in smoothies or added to other meals.

Oil is also produced from hemp and is a little more complicated to use. Considered a cold-pressed oil, it loses its nutritional value when heated. Instead it should be used on salad or even drizzled on soup after it has been served (warmed is OK, hot is not).

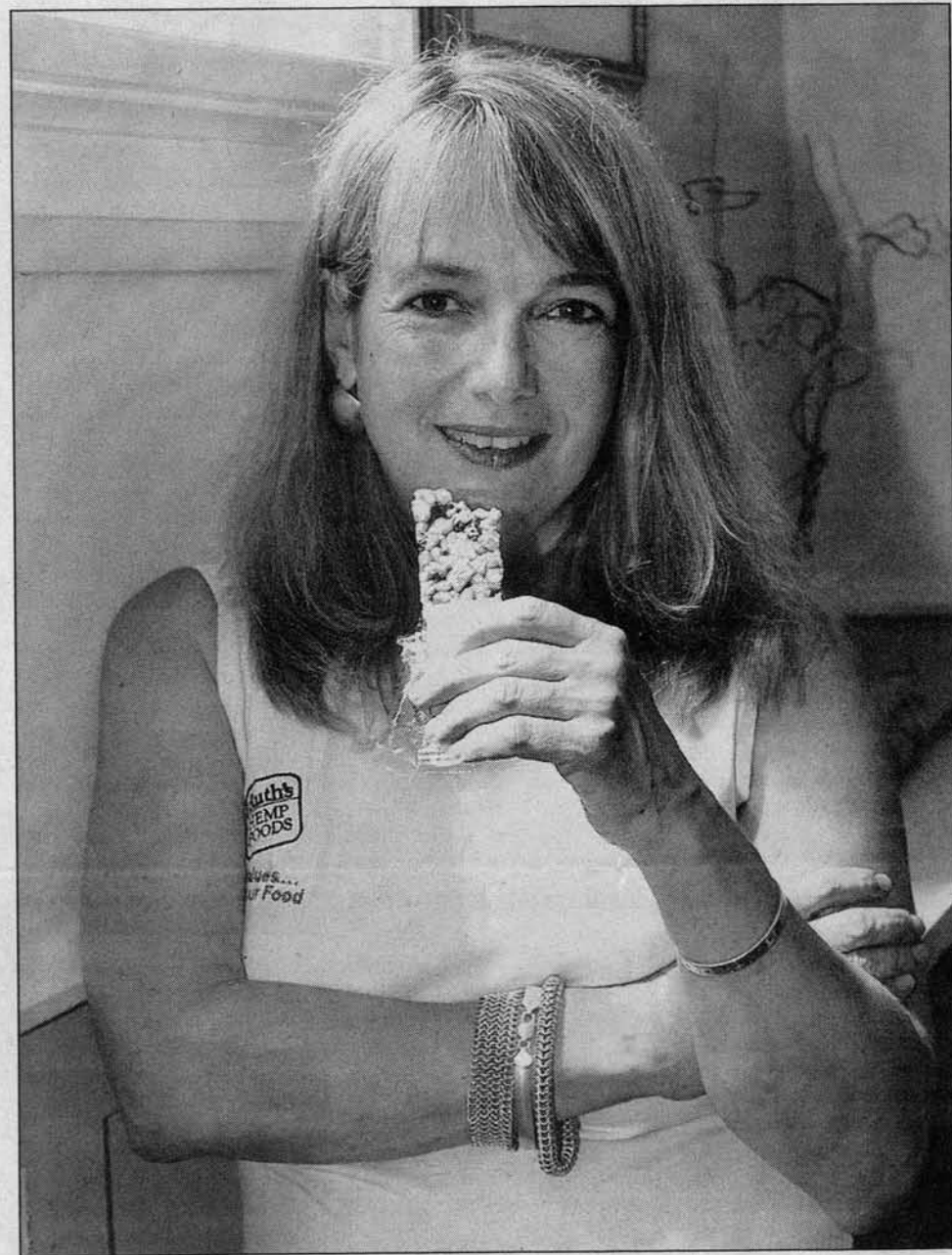
Shamaï said she is always surprised when people question why they should eat hemp, but not why, for example, they should eat a doughnut, which has no nutritional value.

"I do think it's important that people think a lot more about what they eat," she said, pointing out the fossil fuels that are burned shipping or importing foods. "I believe buying locally is important."

If people thought more about the food they ate and where it came from the "world would be in much better shape," she said.

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Mirror photo/DENNIS HANAGAN

Ruth Shamaï, president of Ruth's Hemp Foods Inc., enjoys a hemp bar at her Toronto home. Hemp seeds can be put in baked goods or tossed in salads.