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Sweet Treat for Valentine's

This week, we're talking chocolate: sweet, dark, cancer-fighting decadence. This recipe for bread pudding combines the goodness of whole-grain bread with health-promoting compounds in chocolate and cherries. Dark chocolate is packed with flavonoids, a group of phytochemicals that act as antioxidants. Cherries get their dark red hue from anthocyanins, currently being studied for their ability to inhibit the growth of cancer cells.

Cherry Chocolate Bread Pudding

3/4 cup dried tart or sweet cherries
3/4 cup apple juice or water
8 slices whole-wheat bread
1/4 cup unsweetened Dutch-processed cocoa powder
1/2 cup firmly packed brown sugar
1/4 tsp. salt
2 1/2 cups refrigerated plain coconut milk*, divided
2 large eggs
3 large egg whites
2 tsp. vanilla extract
Canola oil cooking spray
1/4 cup dark chocolate chips, at least 60-63 percent cocoa
2 Tbsp. sliced almonds

Preheat oven to 350 F.

In small bowl, soak cherries in apple juice or water to plump them. Drain well, and set aside.

Stack bread slices and using serrated knife, cut off crust. Cut bread into 1/2-inch cubes; making about 7 cups.

In large mixing bowl, combine cocoa, sugar and salt. Add 1/3 cup of coconut milk, and whisk until smooth. Add remaining coconut milk, and whisk to combine well. Add eggs, egg whites and vanilla and whisk until well combined. Add cubed bread and drained cherries, mixing gently until all bread is moistened. Set mixture aside to soak for 30 to 60 minutes.

Coat 9-inch square baking dish with cooking spray. Stir mixture again to evenly distribute cherries. Spread mixture in prepared pan. Sprinkle on chocolate chips and almonds.

Bake until knife inserted in center of pudding comes out clean, 40-45 minutes. Cool on rack until just warm. Cut pudding into 12 pieces, and serve. Or cool completely, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate overnight. Serve this bread pudding cold or at room temperature.

*This is an unsweetened refrigerated coconut milk beverage with ~50 calories per 1 cup.

Makes 12 servings.

Per serving: 176 calories, 4 g fat (2 g sat fat), 31 g carbohydrates, 5 g protein, 3 g fiber, 232 mg sodium.