



DR. LUSCIOUS & MR. DRIED

One Fig, Two Personalities

BY CAROL PENN-ROMINE

...if you have a fig tree in
your yard, please share.
If you know people with
fig trees in their yards,
please be nice to them.

Few foods have the identity crisis of the fig.

Fresh figs are rich and succulent, with a sweetness that is full-bodied but not cloying, and a texture that is sheer pleasure to sink your teeth into. Dried figs are chewy, dense and so sugary they were used to sweeten foods back when sugar was nonexistent.

If your only exposure to figs is the dried form that shows up in the cookie that, um, rhymes with pig rootin', then you don't know a fig about figs. Not to disparage the cookie, but there is so much more to this fruit than what it becomes when it has been dehydrated, mashed into a paste, wrangled into a thin crust and packaged by machine.

Dried figs enable us to enjoy the fruit when the fresh ones are unavailable or too pricey. The thing is, once you've had a really good fresh fig, you tend to turn your nose up at its prune-y step-sister. Essentially, to compare a fresh fig to a dried one is to compare a long-stemmed American Beauty rose to a bowl of potpourri.

In those countries and regions where it is warm year-round and figs grow easily and abundantly, they are cheap and easy to get hold of. Elsewhere, figs typically must be shipped in, which is complicated by the fact that they're delicate and bruise easily. The sticker shock you experience when you find them in the grocery is the result of their fragility and the distance they must travel.

The fig has the distinction of being the oldest known cultivated plant, dating back some 11,000 years. While you may associate fig trees with the Mediterranean—or with Adam and Eve's initial efforts at haberdashery—they arrived here in the New World about the time the American Revolution was beginning to crank up, when Spanish missionaries brought them to the California territory. Over the past 200-plus years, a number of varieties have made their way around the country, including some that grow well in the Mid-South (see the sidebar Grow Your Own).

So, if you have a fig tree in your yard, please share. If you know people with fig trees in their yards, please be nice to them. Offer whatever you have to within reason, for fresh figs are a supreme delight. Bruised figs, as long as they're not sour smelling, can be used in preserves and for recipes that call for puréeing, so the less-than-perfect specimens still have value.

Figs are highly nutritious and loaded with fiber. They work and play well with both savory and sweet foods. Whether fresh or dried, they pair nicely with game, rabbit and poultry and are right at home in desserts, jams, and of course, those famous cookies.

If you'd like to try your hand at growing your own figs, talk to a nursery specialist or two. The Internet is loaded with the blogs of fig lovers of all stripes, so advice and recipes are close at hand. You should

A poster for 'Farmers' Market at the Garden'. The title is in large green and red serif font. Below it is a colorful illustration of various farm produce including corn, tomatoes, peppers, and leafy greens. To the right of the illustration, the text 'Wednesdays 2:00 - 6:00 pm' and 'April 23 - October 29' is displayed. At the bottom, the Memphis Botanic Garden logo is shown, along with the website 'memphisbotanicgarden.com' and phone number '901-576-4100'. The address '750 Cherry Road' is also listed.

Farmers' Market
at the Garden

Wednesdays
2:00 - 6:00 pm
April 23 - October 29

MEMPHIS BOTANIC GARDEN
Home of the Goldsmith-Curtis Gardens Center

memphisbotanicgarden.com • 901-576-4100 • 750 Cherry Road

An advertisement for 'Delta Grind'. At the top, it lists 'Grits • Masa • Polenta • Cornmeal'. Below this is a large, smiling cartoon corn cob. To the right of the corn, the words 'Delta Grind' are written in a large, white, stylized font. Below the corn, the text 'Always Fresh Stone Ground Pure Yellow Corn' is displayed. Further down, it says 'available at select retail locations and on many local menus'. At the bottom left is a circular logo for 'MAINE MOUNTAIN MISSISSIPPI'. At the bottom right, the phone number '662-281-0510' and website 'www.gritgirl.net' are listed.

Grits • Masa • Polenta • Cornmeal

Delta Grind

Always Fresh
Stone Ground
Pure Yellow Corn

available at select retail locations
and on many local menus

MAINE MOUNTAIN MISSISSIPPI

662-281-0510
www.gritgirl.net

FRESH FIGS WITH GOAT CHEESE AND PEPPERED HONEY

ADAPTED FROM BON APPETIT

½ cup honey

½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

12 fresh figs, washed and dried

½ cup of soft, fresh goat cheese

Combine honey and pepper in small bowl and stir to blend. Trim stems from figs. Starting at stem end, cut each fig into quarters, stopping ½ inch from bottom to leave base intact. Gently press figs open. Spoon a grape-sized ball of cheese into center of each fig. Arrange figs on platter and drizzle with peppered honey. Serves 4.

WINE PAIRING *courtesy of Wine Market*

You'll enjoy a Riesling that is sweet in the nose, but with good acidity to take on the goat cheese.

90 Degrees Riesling Spatlese, 2005, \$16
Smith-Madrone Riesling, Napa, 2006, \$19

FIG ESSENCE

ADAPTED FROM ESSENTIAL FLAVORS, BY LESLIE BRENNER
AND KATHARINE KINSOLVING

This is a good way to use some of those leftover, bruised and end-of-the-season figs. Use fig essence as a glaze for baked chicken or as a topping for ice cream or waffles. Or smear some on an English muffin for breakfast. Makes about 1 cup

1 lb. fresh figs, washed and coarsely chopped

2 tablespoons dry white wine

2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 tablespoon granulated sugar

zest from 1/2 lemon

Combine all ingredients in saucepan and cook, covered, over medium heat for 10 to 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Purée in food processor and then place in a strainer over a large bowl. Force the fig essence through the strainer with the back of a large spoon until all that remains behind are the fig skins, lemon zest and a bit of fig pulp, which you can discard (or keep to stir into hot cereal or bake into a pastry). The fig essence that remains should be almost jam-like in consistency. Transfer to a clean container and refrigerate for later use or use immediately.

be able to pull it off if you have a spot with maximum sun in summer and minimal wind in winter. Fig trees have been known to last a century or more, so when yours takes root and takes off, you have a generous friend for life. The trees self-pollinate, so one is all you need. And about the only pests that will plague them are birds and squirrels. However, most fig trees are so laden with fruit that there is plenty for both humans AND critters.

Don't pick the figs until you are about to eat or use them, as they will ripen no further after leaving the tree. And because they're so fragile, so it's best to wash them right before you eat them and eat them within a couple of days of harvest. Of course, they usually don't last long because they're so darned tasty.

Between the fig's great flavor, nutritional benefits and versatility, it's a fruit worth seeking out. And if you've never had a fresh one before, a wonderful treat awaits you! *eM*

Carol Penn-Romine grew up on a farm in northwest Tennessee and lived in Memphis for 15 years before moving to Los Angeles, where she is a chef, writer and culinary tour guide. You can visit her company, Hungry Passport Culinary Adventures at www.hungrypassport.com.

Grow Your Own

The primary varieties of figs found in the Memphis area are the Brown Turkey, the Celeste and the Tennessee Mountain. The harvest season is typically from early summer until mid-autumn.

BROWN TURKEY FIG: This juicy, mildly sweet fig is best eaten fresh or made into preserves. It is medium to large in size and has dark purple-brown skin with deep pink flesh. The Brown Turkey produces two yields each year.

CELESTE FIG: This is a richly sweet fig that is small to medium in size, with a pale violet-brown skin and pale reddish-amber flesh. While you can cook with this fig, it is excellent eaten fresh. The Celeste grows especially well in the southeastern United States. If you don't have a yard, this variety does well in a large pot.

TENNESSEE MOUNTAIN FIG: This hardy tree produces sweet, medium-sized figs with brown skin and amber flesh. They are excellent for drying and preserving and for trying your hand at homemade Newtons.