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Figs

Figs
figue (French), Feige (German), fico (Italian), higo (Spanish), figo (Portuguese), figen (Danish), fiken (Norwegian), fikon (Swedish, viikuna (Finnish), inzbir (Russian), figa (Polish), smokva (Serbo-Croat), smochina (Romanian), smokinya (Bulgarian), sukon (Greek), incir (Turkish), te'ena (Hebrew), tin (Arabic), anjir (Persian/Hindi), ara (Indonesian), wu hua guo (Chinese), ichijiku (Japanese)
(*Ficus carica* -- Family Moraceae)

The fig trees that Captain Cook saw growing on Tahiti, along with the paper mulberry and the breadfruit, are all related. Within this family is the genus *Ficus*, which contains over 800 different species of fig. Many of these have supplied people living in the tropics not only with food, but also with fiber for cloth and materials for dyes. The fig tree also exudes a white latex that is used in the Middle East to curdle milk for cheeses and yoghurt. The fig tree is the descendant of a wild tree called the caprifig or goat fig, which spread from western Asia into the Mediterranean region in prehistoric times. From there, it went out to the Canary Islands and northwards as far as Germany. Wild figs may be eaten, but they are usually small and dry. The process of selection and cultivation has been known since very ancient times as over two dozen kinds were known to the Romans. The world's oldest known fig tree is said to be growing in a particular Sicilian garden. Figs are now widely cultivated and exported from France, Greece, Turkey, and Brazil.

The structure of the fig is complex, and its lifecycle, extraordinary. Botanically, the fig is not a single fruit, but almost 1,500 tiny fruits which are normally thought of as seeds. Its relatives, the mulberry and breadfruit, are also multiple fruits, but the fig differs from them in that it has its fruits fixed to the inside of a vase-shaped outer structure called the syconium. At the flower stage, the syconium is the same shape, but much smaller and closed, except for a tiny hole at the opposite end from the stem. The syconium contains both male and female flowers, which are not able to fertilize each other because the female flowers mature before the males which produce the pollen. This is when nature provided a helper in the form of the fig wasp (*Blastophaga grossorum*). This tiny, gnat-sized insect inhabits the syconium, but only the female wasp has wings. She develops over the winter inside the female flower. In the spring, she is impregnated by the male. As she crawls around the inside of the syconium, she becomes covered with pollen from the male flowers which surrounds it. She then finds her way out through the little hole and leaves to find another syconium which hopefully, will contain fertile female flowers. Upon entering this little hole, she deposits her eggs; but, as she does so, she brushes against the nearby flowers which will eventually form fertile seeds. The caprifig produces three crops of figs a year by this process. The process is a waste for the wasp however, since she often tears her wings off entering the hole and, finding the female flowers have styles too long for her to be able to push her eggs all the way up into them, she dies.

The common fig is a much more important variety which emerged during classical times. The fruit produce twice a year, with neither crop needing to be caprified. Thus freed from the need of the fig wasp, who cannot stand cooler climates, the fig tree began to spread northward, reaching Britain in the early 16th century. During the same period, it arrived in North America, where it became firmly established in California. In 1769, the Franciscan mission at San Diego was founded and began to grow a Spanish black common fig which, under the names of Mission, Black Mission, and Franciscana, is still one of the leading varieties. There is also an intermediate form, now called San Pietro in Italy (San Pedro in the US), which produces its first crop by itself, but needs to be caprified for the second. In France, the popular varieties are Buissone, Barbillone, and Dauphine Violette. Imported figs are generally from Turkey and are purple with deep red flesh. There is a purple variety grown in Greece, Cyprus, and Israel known as "sari lob". Figs are sold in various markets around the world, but usually not by name.

Ripe figs do not travel well, so it is difficult to find the fresh fruit at a perfect stage of maturity outside the countries where they are grown. They are not juicy in the conventional sense, nor do they have a strong flavour. Figs should be soft, but still hold its shape and have a pleasant aroma. Figs spoil quickly and bruise easily, which explains why 90% of them are dried and not shipped fresh. If they smell sour, then they are overripe and will taste like they smell. Fresh figs should never be stored in a plastic bag, but rather in a paper bag or a shallow bowl lined with a paper towel. Plastic bags are the "kiss of death" for a fresh fig. Ripe fruits should be eaten immediately as chilling them destroys the delicate flavour, and those ripened at home never attain the flavour of those left on the tree in the sun to develop. In the warm countries where the fig grows easily, it is a cheap and staple food. Elsewhere, It is a luxury and the fruit is better known in the dried form, which has different characteristics. Dried figs can be eaten as is or cooked and used in such different recipes as figgy pudding, and the Fig Newton, which was first advertised in 1892 and named after the town in Massachusetts.

Figs contain about 83% natural sugar. Their flavour depends on where they are grown and how ripe they are. Figs are a good source of calcium and dietary fiber. They also contain Vitamins A, B, and C and are well known for their laxative effect and good digestive properties. Figs are also a good source of potassium, and four will contain slightly more than one cup of orange juice. Ounce for ounce, figs have more calcium than milk and about one-third the iron content found in beef liver. Figs also contain ficin, a proteolytic (protein breaking) enzyme similar to papain in papayas and bromelin in fresh pineapple. Proteolytic enzymes split long chain protein molecules into subunits, which is why they help to tenderize meat. Ficin is most effective when stewed and will continue to work even after the food is removed from the stove to cool. Temperatures higher than 160°F will inactivate the enzyme, however. Both fresh and dried figs contain pectin. They are also a good source of the indigestible food fiber lignin which retains water and helps bulk up the stool. Together, lignin and ficin make figs (particularly dried figs) an efficient laxative food.

Figs come in three main varieties -- white, black, and red. Their colour ranges from the palest green to dark gold, burnished brown, or deep purple; and skin colour makes little difference to the taste. The entire fig is edible, although some prefer them peeled, from the soft thin skin to the sweet red or purplish flesh and the myriad of tiny crunchy seeds. Occasionally, there are seedless ones that have escaped fertilization. Dried figs are made from very ripe autumn fruits, usually the golden Smyrna figs or the deep purple Mission figs from Turkey. Dried figs are used in a number of ways, and can be substituted for raisins or prunes in some recipes where a variation is welcomed. They can be cooked, carmalized, or stuffed with nuts. Canned or bottled figs are usually the green Kadota figs, preserved in heavy syrup.

There are now hundreds of commercial varieties available. Some of the more common ones are as follows:

Caprifigs or **wild figs** are cultivated for caprification of Smyrna figs as part of the breeding of new varieties. An unusual variety appeared at Croisic, France, in 1882, and named Croisic. It produces succulent fruit annually and is fully fertile without the mediation of the wasp, and is being used to generate new breeds which, it is hoped, will combine the good points of Smyrna and common figs. Caprifigs produce three crops per year.

Smyrna/Calimyrna figs still resemble the original cultivated ones grown in Asia Minor for more than 2,000 years. They produce two crops per year, but require the fig wasp for fertilization. It is widely grown in Turkey, Greece, North Africa, and California. Smyrna figs are large, amber in color both inside and out, and have an excellent nutty flavour, which is characteristic of fertilized figs. They are among the best figs to eat fresh, but are often dried. The Spanish variety Turon also belongs to this group.

Common figs are grown mainly for eating fresh or canned. Mission or Franciscana figs are a deep purple-black outside and red inside. They turn a jet black when ripe. The texture is coarse, but the flavour is sweet and good and taste the best when just slightly shrivelled. Dottato figs (Italy), or Kadota (US), are yellow-green on the outside and amber or violet on the inside. They are the most important variety of common fig and usually eaten fresh, but can be canned. They are grown mainly in Greece, Italy, and California. Another common variety is the Verdone in Italy or White Adriatic in the US, which is particularly good. It is green on the outside and pink or violet on the inside. Bardajic is the main common fig of Turkey. In California, it is known as Brown Turkey or Brunswick (which covers two kinds). They are medium sized and reddish-brown on the outside and amber-pink inside.

San Pedro/San Pietro figs are now grown less than the Smyrna or common types and are intermediate in flavour between them.