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- [asian food and drink](#)
- [baking and bakeries](#)
- [bay area](#)
- [beer](#)
- [books, magazines, newspapers](#)
- [chefs](#)
- [cocktails and spirits](#)
- [cookbooks](#)
- [cooking techniques and tips](#)
- [cookware and accessories](#)
- [culinary education](#)

Fig Hunting in Napa

posted by [Shuna Fish Lydon](#) | posted in [food and drink](#) |

24th July 2006



The first time I saw my friend [Patrick](#) picking figs was about eight years ago. I was working at [Bouchon](#), just about a mile up the road. We met when he knocked on the kitchen door bearing cherries. The best ones I have eaten to date.

When cherry season ended my chef prodded me to find out what else he might be growing. A handsome, quiet man, Patrick was new to the "farming thing" and after a few invitations to "look and see for myself what else was in the ground," I showed up with an eager extern from garde manger.

My life has never been the same since.



"The farm" is Massa Ranch. A little over 40 acres planted with various wine grapes and a sprinkling of these fruit and nut trees: French prune plums, pears, apples, peaches, English walnuts, Santa Rosa plums, four varieties of cherries, almonds, figs, quince, persimmons, and some wild plums.

The farm is sandwiched between highway 29 and the Napa River. A little one-car bridge is built over Hopper Creek, full of water in the rainy season. Patrick spent two years fulfilling a massive [Riparian Restoration](#) grant from the government, upsetting (wine-maker) neighbors who would rather see no trees along the rivers, creeks and streams, but pleasing the many animals in the sky and on the ground who need the waterways' natural habitats. New trees grow in [tall summer grasses](#), and my dogs zig-zag through, catching and eating unlucky ground squirrels, or picking up the scent of coyotes and rabbits. Raptors and owls sometimes startle and awe, dive-bombing for prey.

BAB Archives

Select Month

Calendar

July 2006						
M	T	W	T	F	S	S
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						
« Jun			Aug »			

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- [Sat, January 23 - Mediterranean Clay Pot Cooking Talk with Paula Wolfert & Patricia Unterman](#)
- [Tue, January 26 - From Tamales to Creme Brulee: The Economics of Street Food](#)
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- [Sat, January 30 - Punch Contest at Omnivore Books](#)
- [Fri, February 5 - San Francisco Beer Week Opening 2010](#)

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- [dessert and chocolate](#)
- [DIY and urban homesteading](#)
- [economy and food costs](#)
- [events](#)
- [farmers](#)
- [farmers markets](#)
- [food and drink](#)
- [food art and music](#)
- [food banks, hunger, volunteer](#)
- [food bloggers and social media](#)
- [food history and celebrities](#)
- [gardening and urban farming](#)
- [health and nutrition](#)
- [holidays and traditions](#)
- [hospitality](#)
- [kids and family](#)
- [KQED](#)
- [local food businesses](#)
- [mocktails](#)
- [near beer](#)
- [non-alcoholic wine](#)
- [online marketplaces and food sites](#)
- [pet food](#)
- [politics, activism, food safety](#)
- [radio](#)
- [recipes](#)
- [restaurants and bars](#)
- [reviews](#)
- [san francisco](#)
- [street food](#)
- [sustainability](#)



Before you see the figs you smell them. A wall of perfume that is thousands of leaves pushing out towards the sun, upwards to the undivided attention of skies that drape the intimate valley floor. Thick, oily musk reminiscent of coconut, spicy, intoxicating fig leaf perfume. And then you see the mass that is not one fig tree but six, spaced like a faerie ring. Taller than tall, broad, immense, impossibly dense.

A city of Black Mission figs.

You walk towards this natural structure. Where does it start and end?



You walk around it, find an opening and step inside. Quiet, cool, damp. Speckled light dances through leaves. Stained glass.



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You're in the fig church.



The first time I saw Patrick picking figs I heard the activity first. The barn doors were open, a cave of darkness traveled farther than I could see. Fantastically loud opera flew out of its cool lightless mouth. Isaac, Patrick' eldest dog, greeted me with what felt like a mime of barked greeting. All I could hear was the full throat opened singing, lungs vibrating with foreign language.

Directly across from the barn is the "Suddenly Seymour" that is the fig clatch. Patrick's figure barely cut an outline at the top of a very tall orchard ladder.



I tasted my first fresh fig only 14 years ago. It felt revelatory. How could I have been missing this sumptuous fruit my whole life? I cut one in half and placed it on my cutting board in a safe spot. I was working at **Lulu**, kitchen of many sous chefs and cooks. People tried to eat my fig. "No, it's here so I can look at it. Isn't it beautiful?" "Shuna?" "Yes chef?" "You're crazy." "Yes chef."



Like most extra ordinary fruit, the best specimens reside in the uppermost branches. When I approached the trees today our youngest dog, Abu, came along. Closer to the ground, he sniffs out the ripest fruits tucked invisibly in the folds and layers. Standing at the door it appears that there are no ripe fruits. Just two steps in will reveal a completely different story. Just a few inches in exposes endless numbers of figs nearing the eggplant-purple skin color that announces their ripeness.



This is what it will look like if a bird has found it before you.

The most avid pest a fig farmer has to deal with is the pesky bird. An indiscriminate palate, the bird takes a peck out of this and that, ruining all the figs (for humans) by exposing them to mold and ants and bees.

How can you tell if the fig is ripe? "It should feel like a testicle." Patrick says.

You can also tell by the way it hangs on the branch. Before they ripen they stick straight out, defying gravity. When they fill with honeyed sweetness it's as if the fig begins to dehydrate, concentrating itself and becoming lax.



This fig is not yet ready, but it has just begun to fall and the stem end is bent downwards.

Fig trees have three pregnancies, bearing fruit well into a Northern California fall if the weather is right. Like camels, fig trees need scant watering if the rainy season gave them a good soaking in their leafless stage. This is why the first crop tends to premier larger, less intensely flavored fruit than the following two. I like the second crop best, or figs from the first crop that have survived on the tree a bit longer.

I eat them out of hand because I rarely have more than I know what to do with. If this situation arises I like to sear them face down in a bit of olive oil and finish with a caramelizing-deglazing of balsamic vinegar. If turning on the stove feels akin to putting your head in it, like in this 100°F heat, slice some tomatoes, season lightly with great salt, spread fresh bread with murky green olive oil and/or cool chevre, sprinkle sliced figs with balsamic and have an open-faced sandwich.

A number of farmers at Bay Area Farmer's markets grow and sell figs of various color, sizes, textures and sweenesses. I wish you good luck in your own fig hunting!

Click on "Figs" in [this link](#) to find out which farms bring them to The Ferry Plaza Farmer's Market.

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This entry was posted by [Shuna Fish Lydon](#) on Monday, July 24th, 2006 at 1:01 am and is filed under [food and drink](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

There are currently 11 responses to "Fig Hunting in Napa"

Why not let us know what you think by adding your own comment! Your opinion is as valid as anyone else's, so come on... let us know what you think.

On July 24th, 2006, *Anonymous* said:

“ Shuna, you have got to be one of my favorite people. Take care boss. Always, Khaleeq

1

On July 24th, 2006, *Ruhama* said:

“ What a lovely piece! I can taste the figs .. thanks, Shuna!

2

On July 24th, 2006, *Michael and Ellen* said:

“ Simply superb piece and photos on figs—the movement with the photos into the "fig church" is breathtaking

3

On July 24th, 2006, *Catherine* said:

“ Lovely! I love figs topped with cheese (goat, Manchego) and broiled for 3 minutes – it really brings out their sweetness!

4

On July 25th, 2006, *Andrea* said:

“ Fantastic post! Informative, too. Now I regret not buying that fig tree my husband and I were looking at a month ago....although we have nowhere to put it!

5

The young man at the nursery told us that Black Mission figs are *the best*!

On July 25th, 2006, *Julie* said:

“ Shuna,
You don't know how it tortured me to read that story! It is one of my sincerest dreams to have my own fig trees one day. I recently stated this wish in a [love letter to figs](#) on my blog. I am so glad I found your story because I have never actually seen a fig tree, or even a picture. That was a treat. Figs are in my market now, but they do come all the way from CA, and are often moldy or hard. I will grow my own someday, but I did not realize how large the trees are!
Thanks,
Julie

6

On July 25th, 2006, *shuna fish lydon* said:

7

“ Here Here for figs!

Julie, the mold on figs is not actually that bad for you. Cut it away and taste the fig. Sometimes the mold helps to sweeten the fig- a little metabolizing action- but check and see with your own taste buds.

I had figs in Ireland on my uncle's farm a few years ago. It convinced me that figs could grow almost anywhere!

On July 25th, 2006, *Luisa* said:

8

“ Wow - what an experience. I wish I could be there! You described it beautifully. My grandfather has a few fig trees on his property in Italy, but I'm never there in September and literally have never been able to eat a fresh one right off the tree. Hrm... something's gotta change.

On July 25th, 2006, *Wendy* said:

9

“ Shuna! you're figgin' nuts and I love you! Nifty photos and equally nifty words!! Love ya love ya love ya!!

On July 26th, 2006, *Amy* said:

10

“ Beautiful photos, Shuna. I love the fig church! We have a couple fig trees growing great in large pots, so fig lovers, don't be scared off by the tree size. Our Desert King is about 5 feet tall and we have it in a clay pot about 20 inches in diameter. Beautiful green fig with bright, watermelon pink interior. Yum.

On June 12th, 2008, *Kitchen Transition | vegelate* said:

11

“ [...] I head out to the farm. Pick cherries, roll around with the dogs, visit Patrick. Next week I go up for a spell to dog & farm sit. Am looking for slightly different work, [...]

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