

## COOKING

### More Than Just a (Fig) Leaf

*[by Tarla Fallgatter](#)*

How lucky I feel to live in California where the fig trees grow! Just last Saturday at the Farmer's Market there were boxes and boxes of delicious, fresh figs available to eat out of hand or, in my favorite way, cut in half and grilled until soft and succulent. Yummy!

The fig has been cultivated since [earliest times](#). Apart from its value as a food tree, it was regarded as sacred by many people. The ancient Hebrews looked upon the fig tree as a symbol of peace and plenty. Mohammed's followers called it the "Tree of Heaven." The old Romans sacrificed the milky sap of the wild fig tree to Juno, and some central African tribes built huts for the spirits of their ancestors in the shape of the sacred fig trees. The fig is the first tree mentioned in the Bible (Genesis 3:7).

Figs epitomize the [Mediterranean](#), its climate, its food, its way of life. The fig is not particularly refreshing, nor does it have a very strong flavor, but it is a fruit to be eaten slowly and savored, from the luscious mouthfuls of soft, pink flesh to the tiniest edible seeds. Some people peel figs, or discard the skin, but it is perfectly edible. Sometimes figs form a "bloom" on the skins that can easily be wiped off and is not cause for concern, but if the skin is so bruised and damaged that you want to remove it, the fruit inside is probably quite spoiled, too. Look for firm, unblemished fruit, which just yields when you hold it in your hand without pressing. It can be various colors, from pale green and golden yellow to deep purple.

Figs are grown in many parts of the world and, when fresh, are delicious chilled and served as an [hors d'oeuvre](#) with thinly sliced ham or cheese. Canned and [dried figs](#) are used in desserts and in baking, especially fruitcakes—indeed the "plums" in plum pudding were originally figs, as in the old Christmas carol request to "bring us a figgy pudding." The [dried variety](#) usually benefits from being soaked or simmered (for 20 minutes or so) before being used. Fresh figs are best refrigerated; dried ones should be kept tightly packed.

### Symbolism

The symbolic meanings of figs preceded those of the fig tree: figs connote abundance and initiation. Ancient Egyptian priests ate them at their consecration ceremonies, and the first desert hermits ate them, too. (Their nutritional value is also obvious.) The many seeds in the fig are supposed to signify unity and the universality of true understanding, knowledge, and sometimes faith.

The fig trees of East Asian tradition are sacred. One of them was Buddha's famous *banyan*. Power and life, the axis of the world, inhabited by genies, they stood for knowledge acquired by meditation.

## History

The [fig](#) is found in a vast, uninterrupted area stretching from eastern Iran to the Canary Isles, through the Mediterranean countries. It is believed to have come from Syria. Later, especially through the Phoenicians, it spread to China and India, and relatively recently was introduced to America and South Africa. Its cultivation goes back to very early times. Drawings of figs, dating back to several centuries before Christ, were found in the Gizeh Pyramid; the plant was undoubtedly known in Babylon and is mentioned three times in the *Odyssey*. Aristotle, Theophrastus and Dioscorides speak of the fig as a plant cultivated for a long time, whose fruits, especially when dried, were highly prized. Pliny the Elder wrote that in his day there was a square where the Romans assembled, in which grew a fig tree in memory of the one under which, according to legend, Romulus and Remus were found suckling milk from the she-wolf. He added that whenever the tree died of old age, the priests would be careful to plant another of the same race.

Except in the Mediterranean, figs are thought of as a luxury fruit because of their high price. Around the Mediterranean basin, however, every wall has its fig tree, sometimes more visited by wasps and birds than by humans, so that the ground around the tree when the fruits are [ripe and dropping](#) seems to be covered with [fig jam](#).

For thousands of years figs have played a very important part in the diet and the economy of the [Mediterranean countries](#), from the days of the hunter and gatherers to the exchange economies of today. While there was no sugar, or very little, they were used for the preservation of cooked fruits. Preserves of figs are still made in Provence. A handful of fresh or dried figs made a very nourishing meal, perhaps with milk clotted with the sap of the fig tree, or with flat cakes of bread. Plato called figs a food for athletes. The Greeks were well aware of the fig's value and forbade its export in order to protect Attica's main resource, "more precious than gold." Figs were never picked before the priests, known as "sycophant," declared that they were ripe and the crop could be gathered. The name "sycophant" was subsequently given, ironically, to those who denounced the contraband fig trade, and then to all informers.

A very ancient cultivated fruit, the fig is often mentioned in the Bible and was probably found wild somewhere in Arabia in ancient times. According to the Bible, when Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, "the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons." Given the abundance of the tree in the presumed region of Eden, one might think that the fruit of knowledge itself was plucked from its branches, rather than from the apple, apricot or even

orange tree, depending on your theory. It would be logical conclusion and put a stop to argument! Moreover, the fig and the fig tree, sacred in all ancient religions, are important symbols and are linked to knowledge in particular.

Figs belong to the family Moraceae (together with mulberries and breadfruit), and there are dozens of wild species. They grow in the same climates as almonds, olives and oranges, but figs are not fruit in the usual sense. The flowers are actually inside the fruit, and they have a most complicated life history. There are several basic types: Smyrna figs (also called Calimyrnan), common figs, San Pedro figs, Kadota, Black Mission figs and caprifigs. Common figs need no pollination and have no seeds. There are some hundreds of different varieties, both white and black. They are propagated by cuttings, and the varieties thus tend to be regional; they form a wide spectrum of flavor, sweetness and tenderness, not to mention size and color.

## Types

**Smyrna** (or Calimyrna) figs are much like those cultivated in Asia Minor more than 2,000 years ago. The name derives from Izmir in Turkey. The Spanish variety Turon belongs to this group. Smyrna figs are large, amber in color both inside and out, and have the excellent nutty flavor which is characteristic of fertilized figs. They are among the best figs to eat fresh, but are often dried.

**Common Figs** are grown mainly for eating fresh or for canning. The Mission or Franciscana figs are a deep purple black outside, and red inside. The texture is coarse but the flavor good. These were grown beginning in 1769 when the Franciscan mission at San Diego was founded and is still one of the leading varieties. Cadota, or Kadota, figs are usually eaten fresh, but may be canned: yellow green outside, and amber or violet inside.

**San Pedro** (San Pietro) figs, now grown less than the Smyrna or common types, are intermediate in flavor.

**Caprifigs** (Wild Figs) are cultivated for breeding purposes, but one variety, named for the French town Croisic, produces an unusually succulent fruit.

Some [kinds of fig](#) cannot be fertilized without help from the fig wasp. The fig tree that concerns us here, *Ficus carica*, which grew wild all around the Mediterranean basin at first and is now cultivated, is only one species of a family that has 600 members. This includes the banyan of India with its aerial roots, the climbing fig of the jungles, a parasite which strangles large trees, and the philodendron and rubber plant, which grow to be huge in the tropics, but are ordinary green houseplants in the West.

Smyrna figs need to be pollinated, and thus produce seeds. This is said to give them more of a

nutty flavor. They are pollinated by a small wasp that is hatched in caprifigs, so caprifigs must be grown near Smyrna figs, otherwise there will be no crop. In fact, branches of caprifigs are actually suspended in the Smyrna fig trees to ensure this caprification. Smyrna figs are the most important type for drying and are grown in Turkey, Greece, North Africa and California.

Dried or roasted for consumption, figs were part of the diet of all the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean and rival bread as a staple. The Romans and the people of southern Gaul followed the example of Greeks in fattening geese on figs.

## **Harvesting**

Ripe figs are highly perishable. The varieties that reach the market, the more durable figs, are usually picked rather unripe. Figs are incomparably better picked straight from the tree at the desired state of ripeness and eaten either hot from the sun or chilled in the refrigerator. In most Mediterranean countries, it is a tradition that the traveler may help himself to a fig as he passes, but not, of course, pick figs into a basket. Dried figs combine especially well with the flavor of anise and fennel, but the bay leaf in the box of Smyrna figs is there to keep away weevils.

## **Fresh, Canned or Dried?**

Figs are usually eaten fresh and have a pleasant taste, but are less nutritious than is commonly believed (80% water, 12% sugar). Part of the fresh fruit crop is canned for preserves, or used in spicy relishes. The greater amount of figs is sold dried, which increases their nutritional value considerably, as the sugar content becomes five times greater than in the fresh fruit and the amount of water is reduced to a quarter.

Dried figs are an important commercial product, as they can be exported to countries with unsuitable climates for their cultivation. The dried product can be eaten as is, and proves very good when stuffed with walnuts or almonds and small pieces of orange or citron. They can be used in many other ways, for example, for Fig Newtons, which were first advertised in 1892 and named after the town of Newton, Massachusetts. Figs can be baked after being covered with confectioner's sugar or honey, or used in beverages such as an alcoholic drink very popular in Arabic countries, or, after if roasted, as a coffee substitute.

Here is my favorite recipe for date, apricot or figs bars:

## **Fig Bars**

### **Filling**

8 oz. dried figs, pitted dates or apricots

1C orange juice

## **Crust**

2C rolled oats

1C unbleached all purpose flour

1C (packed) brown sugar

1 tsp. baking soda

1-1/2 sticks + 2 Tbsp. unsalted butter, melted

*For the filling:* Combine the figs and orange juice in a small pan and simmer, stirring occasionally, until thick, 30 minutes. Preheat the oven to 350°F, butter a 9" square baking dish.

*For the crust:* Stir the oats, flour, brown sugar and baking soda together in a mixing bowl and add the melted butter. Stir until moist and crumbly.

Press half the oat mixture evenly in the bottom of the prepared pan. Spread the fig mixture on top and sprinkle with the remaining oat mixture. Press the mixture down to cover the top of the tart.

Bake until nicely browned, 40 to 45 minutes. Let cool completely, then cut into squares.

Makes: 16 squares

## **Packing**

Dried figs are packed in two forms: Layer (or pulled) and Locoum.

Layer-packed figs are pulled between the fingers and thumb to form a flattened disk shape. They may be packed in overlapping fashion in boxes and graded from "choice" to "extra fancy." Figs are also packed according to the size of spread, which may range from one-and-three-quarters to three inches. Greek string figs are pulled figs that have been strung on reeds for shipment to this country. Locoum-packed figs are shaped into cubes. The word comes from a Turkish word meaning a "square-shape sweetmeat." Dried figs are sold in packages, on strings, and in cans.

## Season

There are two seasons for figs: an early one in June and a late summer season that continues until the first frost. The best supply is in August, September, October and early November. Choose plump fruit that is fresh-smelling and soft to the touch. Hard, underripe fruit will not improve much with time. Figs are highly perishable, so avoid blemishes and any moisture beyond a dewdrop or two at the base. Use figs promptly or place in a single layer in a paper-towel-lined container. Refrigerate them only two or three days. Store dried figs in an airtight container and refrigerate for up to six months or in the freezer for up to one year. Wash just before serving.

## Nutrition

Fresh figs contain moderate amounts of potassium, riboflavin, phosphorus, calcium and thiamin. Dried figs are a source of quick food energy, high in iron, with good amounts of calcium and phosphorus. They supply bulk for a natural laxative.

Fresh, 3 1/2 ounces, raw = 80 calories

Dried, 3 1/2 ounces = 274 calories

Preserved, 3 1/2 ounces, canned in water = 48 calories

Preserved, 3 1/2 ounces, canned in light syrup = 65 calories

Preserved, 3 1/2 ounces, canned in heavy syrup pack = 84 calories

## Note

Pascal uses figs and other delicious fresh fruits and vegetables in his "cuisine reelle" at his namesake restaurant, Pascal, 1000 Bristol Street, Newport Beach CA (949) 752-0107, one of the best French restaurants focusing on the food from the south of France in Orange County. Right next door is Pascal Epicerie, where you can pick up French gourmet meals and picnics to go; his sandwiches and pastries are *fabulous!*

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*pin in fine cookware shops.*