

Perfection Is A Fresh Fig

by Julie O'Hara



Julie O'Hara for NPR

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There may be nothing as threatening to a pastry chef as a perfect fresh fig. No sugar-busting diet fad or belt-tightening economic climate can compare.

Dessert pros may praise fresh figs in cooking magazines and even include them on their restaurant menus, but those are attempts at misdirection — valiant gambits to conceal the secret fear that their most decadent, nuanced, creative

dessert hardly stands a chance against a perfect fresh fig.

Professional pastry chefs know that the fig, alone and unembellished, has it all. I doubt that even a think tank of the world's most gifted culinary minds could find a way to improve upon a fresh fig in flavor, texture or appearance.

It's only fitting, then, that the fig is extraordinary in botanical terms, too. The "fruit" is actually an inverted flower with a collection of unopened blooms lining the inner wall of the delicate sack. Some fig varieties are self-pollinating, while others rely on fig wasps to help those tiny flowers produce hundreds of seeds. This juicy mass of seeds is what we recognize as the fruit's flesh.

Ranging in tone from blush to deep magenta, this sticky, seeded flesh is visually stunning. A food like this resists artifice, disdains garnishes and sauces, and looks best halved down the middle on a plain white dish.

A tender, ripe fig is heavy with its own syrupy liqueur, which tends to drizzle out of its base if you wait too long to eat it. The taste is all honey-like sweetness with a subtle hint of berry and fresher shades of the flavor you might recognize from a certain cookie. A simple, untouched fig is, for me, an extraordinary food.

This is why I'm reluctant to involve a fig in anything approximating a recipe. A recipe implies cooking, or the manipulation of ingredients. Fresh figs require neither manipulation nor fuss. Unlike Adam and Eve, who covered themselves in shame with fig leaves in the biblical Garden of Eden, figs are best left naked.

The ideal candidate for this less-is-more approach is the black mission fig, California's earliest variety, grown primarily in the hot, dry Central Valley. It was first brought to San Diego in 1759 by Spanish priests who traveled up the coast and established a string of Catholic missions, planting fig trees at each one.

The velvety, edible skin of the mission fig is a deep purple color, and it's shaped like a curvy raindrop. The flesh is dark pink with a hint of dusty brown. Its intensely jammy flavor is balanced by soft, fruity acidity, preventing the sweetness from turning to pure candy.

The calimyrna, a round, light green variety originally from Turkey, has a nutty flavor that makes me crave tawny port. The brown turkey fig is the most commonly grown fresh fig in California — where 98 percent of the country's fresh figs are cultivated — and has a milder figgy flavor than the other two. The fourth main California variety, the sweet green kadota, is originally from Italy and is favored for drying and preserving.

Unless you are lucky enough to have a tree of your own, it would have been difficult to find fresh figs outside of California farmers markets until recent years. Figs are also grown commercially in Texas, but most go to processing. This was the case in California, too, until farmers realized that fresh figs could fetch a higher price per pound than the dried figs that are ground into paste and sold to food manufacturers. Furthermore, consumers loved them.

With sales of fresh figs increasing by 30 percent each year for the past five years, they are becoming easier to find in markets around the country, often twice a year. The first crop comes in late spring to early summer from the previous year's growth, while the larger main crop is harvested in late summer through early fall.

With figs' popularity on the rise, I'm betting pastry chefs everywhere are holed up in their kitchens, cracking eggs and slinging flour with a single goal in mind: achieving the luscious play of flavor and texture that nature bestows upon a perfect fresh fig. I feel sympathetic to their plight, so I hope you'll join me and order their *creme brulees* and chocolate tarts when you're dining out, even if you have a basket of lovely fresh figs waiting at home.

The truth is that figs are wonderful for cooking, once you've had your fill of them in their natural state. Figs elevate the food around them *and* shine in their own right.

Roasted with meats, poached in wine, tossed with salad greens or baked into desserts, figs add honeyed flavor and lush texture to any dish. They make unusual sweet chutneys and preserves, addictive gelato and an out-of-this world pizza topping when paired with prosciutto.

My absolute favorite way to eat a fig is cut in half with a chunk of feta cheese nudged into the center. That way, it's not so much cooking, but rather gilding the lily.

Fig And Chicken Kebabs With Rosemary



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Cook these kebabs on an outdoor grill if you like, but a quick run under the broiler makes them even easier for weeknight meals. High-heat cooking brings out the juicy sweetness of even hard or under-ripe figs, so use this recipe to rescue any less-than-luscious specimens, which aren't ideal for eating raw.

Makes 4 servings

2 1/2 tablespoons olive oil, divided

1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar, divided

2 tablespoons chopped fresh rosemary, divided

1/4 teaspoon dried thyme

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

4 (6-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cut into 1-inch chunks

16 figs, trimmed and halved

Nonstick cooking spray

8 metal skewers

Coarse salt to taste

In a bowl, combine 2 tablespoons oil, 1/4 cup vinegar, 1 1/2 tablespoons rosemary, the thyme and black pepper to taste. Add chicken and toss to coat. Cover and marinate in the refrigerator for 30 minutes (may be done up to 2 hours ahead).

In a separate bowl, combine remaining oil, vinegar, rosemary and black pepper to taste. Add figs, toss gently to coat, and set aside until chicken finishes marinating.

Position oven rack about 6 inches from heat source and preheat broiler to high. Line a broiler pan or baking sheet with foil and coat with nonstick cooking spray.

Thread the chicken and figs onto skewers, alternating as you go, and place on broiler pan. You may need to do two batches. Season chicken and figs on both sides with salt to taste.

Broil until chicken is lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Turn skewers and broil until chicken is cooked through, about 3 to 5 more minutes. If working in batches, transfer to a plate, cover with foil to keep warm, and repeat with remaining

skewers. Serve immediately.

Fig And Wheat Berry Salad



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Warm wheat berries slightly wilt the arugula in this hearty side dish that combines the elements of a green salad with a whole grain. Take advantage of this recipe's versatility by substituting watercress or spinach for the arugula; blue cheese for the feta; or balsamic for the raspberry vinegar. Wheat berries are also called "whole grain wheat," or "hard red winter wheat." Find them in natural food stores or specialty markets. If unavailable, substitute other grains, such as quinoa or barley.

Makes 4 servings

1 cup wheat berries

4 ounces arugula leaves (about 4 packed cups)

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 1/2 tablespoons raspberry vinegar

1/2 cup crumbled feta cheese

6 figs, trimmed and cut into sixths

Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Cook wheat berries according to package directions.

Add arugula to a large bowl, cover with warm wheat berries and toss. Drizzle with oil and vinegar, and toss again.

Gently fold in feta and figs, and season with salt and pepper to taste.

Serve warm or at room temperature.

Fresh Fig Clafouti



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A clafouti is a homey French custard with fresh fruit. I've adapted the simple method from Julia Child's Mastering the Art of French Cooking (Alfred A. Knopf 1961), which requires little more than whirling the batter together in a blender. Baking in a cast iron skillet underscores the rustic look and helps create a Swedish pancake-like crust around the feather-light custard, but a 9-inch pie plate will work fine, too. Best eaten warm, this not-too-sweet dessert is delicious any time of day.

Makes 6 servings

Nonstick cooking spray

1 1/4 cup milk (low-fat or regular)

1/3 cup granulated sugar

3 large eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup all-purpose flour

6 figs, trimmed and quartered

1 tablespoon raw sugar such as turbinado (granulated may be substituted)

Powdered sugar, for serving

Preheat oven to 350 degrees and coat a 9-inch cast iron skillet or pie plate generously with nonstick cooking spray.

Add the milk, sugar, eggs, vanilla, salt and flour to a blender in that order so the flour does not cake onto the blade.

Blend on high for 30 seconds. Scrape down any flour adhering to the sides and blend for 30 seconds more, or until smooth. Pour into the skillet.

Scatter the figs over the batter and sprinkle the raw sugar (or granulated, if substituting) on top. Bake in the center of the oven for 45 to 55 minutes, or until clafouti is puffed and edges are golden brown. A thin knife inserted in the center should come out clean. Cool for 5 to 10 minutes (clafouti will collapse), sift powdered sugar over the top and serve warm.

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