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Go Fig-ure: The Beauty of Figs

by [Kate Heyhoe](#)

Mention "figs" and most people probably wouldn't be able to describe how a fig tastes, or even what a fig looks like. But mention Fig Newtons and then you're on to something.



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Fig Newtons are likely the only mass-produced, supermarket-ready fig product instantly recognizable by consumers. For many of us, these soft treats were (and still are) a favorite childhood cookie. Sadly, as good as the Newtons are, biting into the gooey, seedy, sweet filling is about as close to enjoying true fig flavor as many of us get.

The reason? Fresh figs have a short season, extending just from late summer into fall. Dried figs are widely available in produce sections, but I'd wager big bucks that few shopping lists note "dried figs" anywhere near as frequently as apples, oranges, or even kumquats. Probably because most people have no idea what to do with figs.

Recently, however, the world of dedicated foodies has rediscovered the pleasures of figs, and in restaurants and gourmet kitchens, we're seeing some exciting concoctions made with this ancient fruit. Additionally, a commercial puréed fig blend is sold as a fat substitute for baked goods, to reduce or replace butter, margarine

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and shortening without loss of moisture and mouthfulness.

In Europe and the Middle East, fresh figs are commonly grown, both in orchards and home gardens. Many of their serving ideas have crossed the seas into our continent. For instance, fresh figs and cheese, fig vinegar, and fig desserts look and sound as glamorous as they are tasty. Some of the best fig dishes are the simplest: Green Salad with Blue Cheese, Walnuts and Figs; Figs with Mascarpone Cheese and Honey; Figs and Prosciutto; Fig and Pear Chutney, as well as figs in braided breads, muffins, and cookies.

Should fresh figs be peeled? Only if the skin is thick and tough. What savory flavors pair well with figs? Cheeses, salty meats (like prosciutto and bacon), and game are enhanced by the sweet contrast of figs. In Texas, a balsamic-fig vinegar blend is a favorite of hunters, who add it to venison, wild boar, and quail.

For fresh figs, farmers markets and some specialty food markets are your best source. Fig trees grow well in California, Texas, and the South, where winters are mild. And while there are literally hundreds of fig varieties, only about half a dozen are grown commercially in California, this country's largest producer of figs. According to the California Fig Advisory Board, these include:

The Calimyrna Fig—Noted for its delicious nut-like flavor and tender, golden skin, the Calimyrna fig is the popular favorite for eating out of hand. As the name implies, the Calimyrna is the California version of the Smyrna fig, which was imported by a San Joaquin Valley grower.

The Mission Fig—Named for the mission fathers who planted the fruit as they traveled north along the California coast, the Mission fig is famous for its distinctive flavor. The fresh fruit exhibits a deep purple shade which darkens to a rich black when dried, making this fig an esthetic, as well as an edible, delight in all recipes.

The Kadota Fig—The Kadota fig, the American version of the original Italian Dattato, is thick-skinned and possesses a beautiful creamy amber color when ripe. Practically seedless, this fig is a favorite for canning and preserving as well as drying.

The Adriatic Fig—Transplanted from the Mediterranean, the Adriatic fig is the most prolific of all the varieties. The high sugar content, retained as the fruit dries to a golden shade, make this fig the prime choice for fig bars and pastes.

If you're still unsure of how to serve figs (fresh or dried), the recipes below should offer plenty of inspiration.

Fig Recipes

Fig and Goat Cheese Bruschetta
Warm Goat Cheese Tarts with Fig Jam and Rosemary
Fall Greens with Grilled Figs and Bacon Vinaigrette
Pork Tenderloin with Figs, Brandy and Parsnips
Spiced Fig Ice Cream

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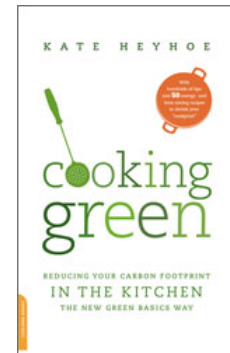
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