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Fig Fest 2004: Growers and food lovers celebrate

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By Ramona Frances - The Madera Tribune

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Growers and food lovers from Madera and Fresno have put their heads together to spawn a public event in celebration of the fig.

There may be good reason to applaud. Ninety-five percent of the figs that are produced from 15,000 acres in the United States are from California's Central Valley; 8,425 acres of figs are grown in Madera County alone. In total, about 30 million pounds of dried figs are produced annually from California.

"We have a wonderful product that is worthy of appreciation," said Richard Matoian, manager of the California Fig Advisory Board.

This first time half day event will be held Aug. 14, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Vineyard farmers market in Fresno, corner of Shaw and Blackstone. Admission is free.

"To our knowledge, there has never been a fig festival before, no fig queen, no fig parade, no fig floats," Matoian said with a chuckle.

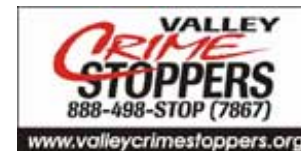
The event is sponsored by the California Fig Advisory Board and Slow Food Madera. Ron Radoicich from Madera has spearheaded the event. Radoicich, a third generation farmer and board member of Slow Food, said, "There is a group of us who have an interest in capturing the spirit of Madera by celebrating the history of the fig and the people who grow it."

Radoicich, who lives in south Madera County is one of the largest suppliers of fig trees



Ronald Radoicich, president of Terrestre, Inc., holds an assortment of figs grown in greenhouses on his property.

Photo by: Wendy Alexander



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in the local area, and comes from a family who has grown figs for decades.

"The inspiration for the fig festival was kind of a natural," said Radoicich. "In the past, fig growing had quite a bit of prominence, it was a vital part of our history. It is something that needs to be treasured," he said.

"The idea of a festival started out modestly, as a way of giving people access to a local product. It's a way to show appreciation of figs in the valley, a way for Slow Food Madera to promote and invigorate interest in the local fig industry," he said.

Several restaurants in the valley including Madera's Vineyard restaurant and bar, are commemorating the event by offering special courses that include figs in the menu. Grilled figs wrapped in bacon and locally made Braun's gourmet fig ice cream will be offered there. Chef Overbaugh with Erna's Elderberry House in Oakhurst will also have fig inspired recipes on the menu. Compagnia, Citron, Echo, Elbow Room, Love and Garlic, and Whole Foods in Fresno, are also participating.

The cookbook "Fig Heaven" will be available at the event. Author Marie Simmon's will be present for book signing.

In California there are hundreds of fig varieties, but only a select few are grown commercially in California. The following varieties are grown, dried and packaged for the consumer and the industrial market. (California Fig Advisory Board)

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 Black 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.

Other types noted for home garden use are the Brown Turkey, a large fruit with purple-green skin and red flesh. The Italian Everbearing is brown in color, similar to Brown Turkey and is a prolific producer.

Figs are typically harvested in the late summer and early fall, and because the fruit is often dried becomes available all year long.

Figs that are to be stored are ordinarily dried by allowing them to wilt on the trees and drop onto the ground in the orchards. If there is lawn under the trees, the figs must be picked up and placed on wooden or paper trays in the sun, or they can be dried in the oven with a slow heat. The oven door should be left ajar, and care taken not to heat the figs above 135 degrees F.

They should be kept in the oven, or dried at intervals, turning them occasionally until

they have lost about 3/4 of their fresh weight.

Store immediately in air-tight jars to prevent insects from getting into them. Dried figs may also be kept in your freezer. Do not wash dried figs before freezing, just package dried figs without sugar in plastic bags or other suitable containers. Figs should be sorted and defective ones discarded before drying. Sun-dried figs should also be heat-treated in this manner for about two hours if they are to be stored for very long.

You can find fresh California figs in the market from the middle of June through the first week in July, then from the beginning of August to the end of October. Look for fresh figs that are soft to the touch. Best when used fresh, figs may be kept in the refrigerator for up to three days.

Fresh Fig Bread

Ingredients:

- 1 1/2 cups California fresh figs, stemmed and coarsely chopped
- 1/4 cup dry sherry
- 1 2/3 cup flour
- 1/2 cup chopped San Joaquin nuts
- Teaspoon each: nutmeg and cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup light oil
- 2 eggs

Directions:

Combine figs and sherry; let stand 15 minutes. Mix together flour, walnuts, cinnamon, nutmeg, baking soda and salt. In a mixer bowl, beat sugar, oil and eggs to mix. Blend in flour mixture; gently stir in figs and sherry. Pour batter into well-greased loaf pan and bake at 350° F for 1 1/4 hours or until bread feels firm when gently pressed in center. Cool in pan 10 minutes then invert onto a rack. Bread can be frozen for later use.

Brandied Figs

Sprinkle 1/2 cup baking soda over 3 quarts firm, fresh figs. Pour over the figs 3 quarts boiling water and let them stand for 15 minutes. Then drain and rinse them well in several changes of clear, cold water. Drain the figs and dry them, in the sunshine if possible, while the syrup is being prepared.

Stir 5 cups sugar into 8 cups water. Bring the liquid to a boil, boil for 10 minutes, and skim. Add the figs gradually so the boiling syrup is not cooled and cook the figs gently

for about 1 hour, or until they are transparent. Lift the figs carefully from the syrup to a shallow pan and continue to cook the syrup until it is very thick. Pour the thick syrup over the figs so they are completely covered and let them stand overnight to plump.

In the morning pack the figs into hot, sterilized pint jars, stem ends up. Add 1/4 cup brandy to each jar and fill jars to overflowing with the syrup. Seal the jars and store them in a cool, dark spot.

Tagliarini with fresh figs, contributed by Chris Mariscotti of the Vineyard restaurant.

- 6 to 8 qts salted water
- 1 lb of imported dried tagliarini pasta
- 8 tbsp unsalted butter
- Shredded zest of 1 lemon
- 12 lg. ripe figs, peeled &
- Coarsely chopped
- Pinch of red pepper flakes
- 1/4 tsp black pepper
- 1-1/4 cups freshly grated parmigiano-reggiano cheese
- Salt to taste

This dish comes together in a matter of minutes. The trick is not overcooking the figs. Cook and drain the pasta just as the sauce is ready to be blended with it.

Bring salted water to a boil. If using dried pasta, cook it about halfway, 4 minutes. Meanwhile, melt the butter in a 12 inch heavy skillet over medium heat. If you are using fresh pasta, drop it into the water once the butter has melted.

Raise the heat under the skillet to high, add the zest and cook 30 seconds. Add the figs and both peppers. Cook over high heat 1 minute, searing on all sides by turning them gently with two wooden spatulas.

Once the figs are seared, quickly drain the pasta and add it to the skillet with the cream. Toss the pasta with the figs and cream no more than 30 seconds. Add the cheese and toss until blended. Add salt. Turn the pasta from the skillet into a heated serving bowl or individual soup dishes, and serve immediately.



Ramona Frances

Ramona Frances is a staff columnist, writer and photographer for the Madera Tribune. She writes a column called Master Gardener as well as other stories. You may contact Ramona at 674.8134 ext. 222 or by e-mail [ramona \(at\) maderatribune.net](mailto:ramona@maderatribune.net)

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