



Special Feature: **Chocolate Recipes!**

Figs

by *Louise Fiszler & Jeannette Ferrary*

Scientists tell us, that for the young, figs are one of the most-irresistible fruits of all. That is because they are intrinsically sweet, the taste that all newborns innately prefer. Figs are 55% sugar, the highest sugar content of any common fruit. In fact a syrup made from figs was used as a [sweetener](#) by the Assyrians in 3000 B.C., a practice that continued into the Middle Ages. When sugar became scarce during the American Civil War fig syrup came back into vogue.

Scientists also insist that the fig is from a botanical prospective, an inside out strawberry. Its seedlike [fruit](#) is surrounded by thick flesh, just the opposite construction of the strawberry. Figs also share a trait with pineapple and papaya leaves: they contain an enzyme that digest proteins and can therefore be used to tenderize meats.

Figs have been cultivated for 6,000 years. They have the dubious distinction of being the first fruit in history selected for artificial ripening. During the Renaissance, figs were brought to England from Italy, but they were not cultivated in America until the eighteenth century when the Franciscan friars had them planted at the California missions. That was the origin of the Mission fig, the purple to black, fairly large variety, sold both fresh and dried. Calimyrna is also a California variety, a variation on the smyrna fig, which is lighter in color. Both are [delicious](#) dried. The Kadota is thick-skinned and is available fresh or canned.

Those who know only dried or canned figs are always amazed at the fresh fruit, from its delicate flesh, smooth as a baby's cheek to its deep, heady, purple smelling perfume. Once peeled, a fig can disappear in a few succulent bites; but it can also be wrapped with prosciutto, roasted on a skewer, or served with port, cream or almost any kind of cheese. Dried figs, which should be slightly moist, lend themselves to stuffing, stewing and chopping into muffins. Fig paste, a specialty of some Mediterranean countries, is used in many confections and baked goods. But it is Turkey that has come up with the world's most unusual fig preparation: there they dry the figs, string them together, and wear them as necklaces.

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Consumer and Cooking Guide

Market Selection

Mission, Brunswick, Brown Turkey, and Calimyrna are black-skinned with pinkish flesh. These are sweeter than the green-skinned, violet-fleshed Kadota. All figs should be soft to the touch. The skin should be free of blemishes and should not be split.

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Availability

July through November; peaking in October.

Storage

Use figs as soon as possible. They may be stored, wrapped airtight, in the refrigerator for up to 3 days.

Equivalents

1 pound = 8 large or 15 small figs.

Nutritional Value

Good source of natural sugar and iron.

About 50 calories per fig

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Fig and Cheese Crostini

makes 12 crostini

12 slices country bread, lightly toasted
 1 garlic clove, cut in half
 12 slices scamorza cheese or smoked mozzarella
 3 fresh figs, each cut into 4 slices

Rub each slice of toast with the cut edge of the garlic. Place a piece of cheese, topped with a fig slice, on each toast. Place under the broiler or in a 450 degree Fahrenheit oven until the cheese is melted and bubbly. Serve immediately.

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Rice Pilaf with Figs and Prosciutto

serves 6

2 tablespoons butter
 2 tablespoons oil
 1 small onion, chopped
 1 clove garlic, chopped
 1/4 pound prosciutto, diced
 6 fresh figs (preferably Kadota) diced
 3 fresh sage leaves
 1 1/2 cups long grain rice
 3 cups chicken stock
 3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
 salt and pepper

In a medium saucepan, heat the butter and oil. Saute the onion, garlic, and prosciutto about 10 minutes. Stir in the figs, sage, and rice. Cook, stirring, about 3 minutes, making sure that the rice grains are coated with butter and oil. Add the stock and bring to a boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer about 18 minutes. Remove from heat, place a tea towel under the cover, and let stand 10 minutes. Stir in the parsley and season with salt and pepper.

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Fresh Figs in Yogurt

Serves 2-3

Wonderful as a breakfast starter, as a soothing relish for spicy dishes, or as a topping for toasted pound cake.

12 fresh figs, coarsely chopped
 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
 2 tablespoons chopped fresh mint
 1 cup plain yogurt

Combine all the ingredients and let marinate in refrigerator at least 3 hours before serving.

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Jeannette & Louise are Bay Area freelance food writers and the authors of several books including Sweet Onions & Sour Cherries and A Good Day for Soup.

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