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Figs - growth, varieties and usage; includes related article on Chef Michael Cimarusti

[Art Culinaire](#), [Fall, 2002](#)

2	3	4	5
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"I call a fig a fig, a spade a spade." Menander, Greek playwright

10 • ...

28

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The fig might have been the true "forbidden fruit" in the Garden of Eden, but it remains undisputed that the first article of clothing worn by mankind was made of fig leaves. In fact, the fabulous fig has existed since almost the beginning of time. From Attica to Assyria and from Babylonia to Sumer, the fig has survived the fall of some of the greatest empires of the world.

Because of its noted quality as an energy food, the fig "figured" prominently in the diet of the first Greek Olympians. Likewise, the gluttonous Epicureans of the Roman Empire feasted on figs. Shakespeare made numerous references to figs in his works as well. In his play Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra is delivered a basket of figs containing an asp, the venomous snake that ultimately causes her death.

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Highly valued for their sweet flavor and unusual texture, figs were also one of the first fruits to be dried and stored, an important asset before the days of refrigeration. As people began to travel the world to quest, conquer, and discover, the dried fig provided valuable and practical sustenance. Still today, open-air marketplaces all over the world brim with baskets full of dried figs.

Dried figs range in many dark colors, depending on the variety and whether sulfur has been added to maintain color, inhibit moldiness, and strengthen the skin of the fig for preservation. They are extremely versatile and always available. On the other hand, fresh figs are abundant only in the summer and fall. Strangely enough, figs are one of those rare fruits that are still subject to seasonality. Growers have not yet developed techniques to make figs available year round.

Figs are naturally are covered with a characteristic chalky, matte coating, but are sometimes coated to help prevent spoilage and blemishes. Besides for being eaten fresh or dried, they are also

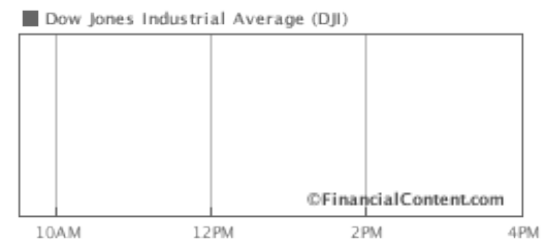
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available in many forms such as paste, syrup, concentrate, nuggets, diced, and even powdered, mostly for commercial use.

Indigenous to the Mediterranean and Asia Minor territories, the fig tree comes from the Mulberry family and bears the common Latin name, *ficus carica*. The fig, itself, is actually an inverted flower that develops into a fruit. The flower develops on the inside of a pear-shaped hollow within a small opening at the base called the "eye." The pulp that grows inside holds the seeds encased by fleshy buds.

There are many fig varieties in the United States, but the most common commercially grown figs come from California. Popular types of figs are the Calimyrna, Mission, Kadota, and Adriatic. The Calimyrna is the most prevalent commercial variety and is referred to as the Smyrna when originating in Turkey. The tree bears large fruit, thanks to the help of the aptly named "fig" wasp who cross-pollinates this species with the Capri fig trees, a process known as "caprification." With the help of "the birds and the bees," the Calimyrna Fig bears large yellow fruit with an amber pulp.

The Mission figs are most popular and commonly found in the peak of the summer growing season. They can appear in varied shades, but a deep violet to black color is most prominent. These black beauties are prized for their fresh, juicy pulp and surgary-sweet, intense flavor. On the other hand, Kadota figs are the most popular variety for canning. This golden-tinted fig is practically seedless, making it a practical candidate for preservation. The Adriatic variety is a light shade of chartreuse with a vibrant strawberry-colored pulp. Lastly, Brown Turkeys, sometimes erroneously referred to as Turkish Browns, come in shades of beige to brown, mottled with purple streaks. These large figs have a pale interior compared with others. In addition to these four popular varieties, a rising star is the Magnolia, also called Brunswick. Larger in size than other varieties of figs, it is amber-skinned with a pale-pink flesh.

Besides these superstars, there are hundreds of figs appearing in all shapes from ovular to pear and everything in between. The fig also sports vivid colors of summer and fall in variegated tints ranging from off-white to deep green and from dark brown to an almost onyx violet-purple. These rich shades might inspire a food-loving artist to paint a chromatic "still life with figs."

Around the world, numerous other varieties of figs also have their distinctive flavors and uses. Although the major word producers of figs are North America, Greece, Spain, and Turkey, fig trees easily adapt to areas with plenty sunshine and temperate weather. Although Mediterranean countries are the most prominent in which to grow figs, many other regions in the world are scattered with fig trees, thanks to favorable conditions and adaptable fig varieties.

Not only do figs have phenomenal flavor, but their health benefits make them worth seeking out. Recent medical research reveals that figs have very high levels of the anti oxidant polyphenol, the magic elixir found in green tea. The isoflavones in figs are also the same ones found in tofu and provide the benefits of soy, known for its role in the prevention of certain diseases. Additionally, figs are cholesterol-free, fat-free, and high in car hydrates an natural sugars that can benefit diabetics. Chock full of nutrients, there is nothing bad to be said about figs.

2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9

10 • ...



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