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# FEAST OF FIGS

## New crop shows versatility in sweet and savory roles

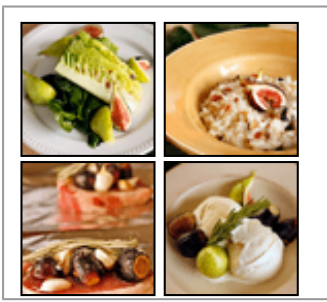
Georgeanne Brennan, Special to The Chronicle  
 Wednesday, August 23, 2006

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There is something sensuous, almost voluptuous about soft, sweet fresh figs. Bite into a ripe fig and, the flavors are so concentrated, it is almost like eating jam. It is unlike any other fruit.



I first tasted a fresh fig when I lived in Provence, tending goats and making goat's milk cheese. Our little valley, surrounded by deep forests, was full of silvery olive groves, lush vineyards and rolling golden wheat and barley fields. Every house had a year-round vegetable garden and a small orchard with peaches, cherries, plums and figs.

This rural landscape was new to me except for the fruit trees. I had grown up in a Southern California beach town at a time when fruit trees were still abundant there, and I had helped my grandmother harvest her summer canning crop, climbing the trees and picking the fruit.

I didn't like picking the figs, though, because they were sticky and felt squishy, and the leaves of the trees made my arms itch. I refused to eat them, finding their soft flesh and tiny seeds too different from the familiar juice and firm, smooth flesh of the other fruits I loved.

However, years later, on a late August day in Provence, my neighbor down the road proudly presented me with a dozen figs from her own tree. The deep purple fruit was artfully arranged on a plate covered with fresh fig leaves. She insisted I try one. As a newcomer in the small, rural community in Southern France, I treasured the gestures of friendship shown me, and if eating a fig were part of the deal, I would do what was required. I bit into one, still warm from the sun. The deep, strawberry-red flesh was sweet, jammy, almost honeyed. I finished eating it and felt, standing there under the brilliant blue sky, that I had sampled the fruit of paradise.

## Figs

[Figs show versatility in sweet and savory roles.](#)

[A few ways figs are featured at Bay Area restaurants:](#)

## Seasonal Cook

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## Two figs seasons

Figs have two seasons, one in June and another, longer season beginning in August and continuing on into early fall. That means now is the time to revel in figs. Not only are they delicious to eat out of hand, they are one of the most versatile of all fruits in the kitchen, amenable to both sweet and savory treatments.

Figs combine well with salty flavors. When they're stuffed with prosciutto or Gorgonzola cheese they make excellent appetizers. They're also terrific in salads with toasted walnuts and pancetta, and even in risotto. The fruit can also be baked, glazed and grilled, and used in breads, cookies and ice cream.

Figs have different flavors, too. The sought-after Violette de Bordeaux, a small, black variety with dark red flesh, tastes like raspberries with a hint of citrus. Panaché, pale yellow with stripes of green when ripe, has bright red, faintly strawberry-testing flesh. The popular Mission fig, black, with rosy flesh, has a sweet berry flavor.

Turkey's Smyrna figs are renowned for their golden, honeyed flavor.

## An Algerian favorite

My favorite fig, however, is one that I grow in my back yard -- Sultane de Marabout, a Smyrna-type fig introduced into the United States in the early 1900s from Algeria, it's a big, maroonish-green fig, with golden-amber flesh, intensely honeyed, with an exotic hint of muskmelon.

A friend gave me a cutting from his tree that I planted 10 years ago. Now it's nearly 20 feet high with a trunk as thick as a torso. In late August, it is heavy with amazingly

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Figs are still a backyard fruit in Northern California, where people like me have one or two trees, but they are also an important commercial fruit. Ninety-eight percent of all figs grown in the United States for the fresh market come from California, with most of the orchards within a hundred or so miles of the Bay Area, primarily in Fresno, Merced and Madera counties.

Figs have been grown in California since the missionaries brought them here in the mid-1700s, and have been grown commercially in large quantities, primarily to produce dried figs, for more than 100 years. But the fresh figs have been revived only recently, with sales up by 60 percent in the past five years.

Chefs have rediscovered them, says Richard Matoian, manager of the California Fig Advisory Board in Fresno, which has made them popular on TV cooking shows and with home cooks.

The figs that the missionaries introduced were not the big moneymaker-figs or "true figs of commerce," that the California orchardists of the late 19th and early 20th century wanted to grow. The big moneymakers were the Smyrna figs grown in Turkey and elsewhere in the Middle East -- dried fat, golden figs that dominated the lucrative world trade.

### Importing the Smyrna

Convinced they could be grown in California, agricultural explorers and pioneer nurserymen from California traveled to Turkey's Meander Valley in the late 1800s to acquire cuttings of the Smyrna fig, bring them back to California and plant them.

They were successful, and hundreds of cuttings were planted from Sacramento to Fresno, but although the cuttings thrived and grew into big, lush trees, their fruit fell to the ground before maturing, and no one could understand why.

It was discovered that the Smyrna fig, unlike the Mission or common figs, was female and needed cross-pollination by the male Capri fig, and that this could be accomplished only by a specific wasp. In 1898, Walter Swingle, an agricultural explorer working for the USDA, successfully shipped six boxes of wasp-laden Capri figs picked from the botanical gardens in Algiers to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and then on to George Roeding's Fresno orchard.

Roeding was so excited when his Smyrna fig trees produced ripe fruit that he offered a \$25 prize for the person who could come up with the best name for the Smyrna fig in its new home. The winning name was Calimyrna, a name the fig still bears here today, although it is known in the rest of the world as Lop Injir or Sari Lop.

Fig growers are responding to today's increased demand by planting new orchards and replanting old, nonproductive orchards with newer varieties using advanced planting methods and harvesting techniques.

They're also looking at different varieties of figs to plant on a commercial scale for the fresh market, and are turning to the National Clonal Germplasm Repository at Davis for research information.

More than 200 varieties

Ed Stover, the director, oversees more than 200 varieties of figs from all over the

world as part of the 6,000 plant accessions at the repository's orchards, groves and vineyards near Winters. Trees and vines are grown and maintained here, and cuttings are made available to researchers and nurseries.

With 200 different fig varieties for growers to experiment with, we'll no doubt see more and more fig types in our markets over the coming years, and become as picky about our fig varieties as we are about melons or tomatoes. A Panache fig, stuffed with goat cheese and wrapped with bacon, tastes different than a Brown Turkey or a Mission fig given the same treatment.

Take a look at the farmers' markets and supermarket produce bins and experiment with as many different fig varieties as you can find, taking advantage of their varied colors, shapes and flavors to enrich your kitchen table all season long.

For more recipes, see Page F6.

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## Glossary of figs

When shopping for figs, choose soft fruits, as they will have developed their flavor.

Even slightly shriveled is a better choice than firm. Here are some fig varieties:

**Black Mission.** The classic California fig, medium size, teardrop shape, with dark purple skin, strawberry flesh. Sweet fig flavor.

**Brown Turkey.** Large, teardrop shape with an elongated neck. Brownish-purple skin and amber-red flesh. Mild, sweet flavor.

**Calimyrna.** Lop Injir or Sari Lop, called Calimyrna in California, a very large, round



fig with amber skin and golden amber flesh. A deep honey flavor.

Panaché. Medium size, rounded teardrop shape, with striking chartreuse and yellow striped skin, and bright reddish pink flesh. Sweet, somewhat mild flavor.

Pied-de-Boeuf. Medium-large, round fig with brownish mauve skin and strawberry flesh. Sweet and slightly honeyed.

Smryna. Big, fat, honeyed golden figs from the Middle East. Often dried and pressed.

Violette de Bordeaux. Small, teardrop shape, with very dark purple, almost black skin, and dark reddish pink flesh. Very sweet with hints of raspberry.

-- G.B.

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## Fig & Prosciutto Risotto

### INGREDIENTS:

2 cups chicken broth

3 cups water

3 tablespoons butter

2 tablespoons olive oil

**2 tablespoons minced shallots**

**1 1/2 cups Arborio rice**

**1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper**

**1/4 cup finely grated Parmesan cheese**

**3 ripe figs, stem end trimmed, diced**

**2 ounces prosciutto, minced**

**1/2 teaspoon sea salt or kosher salt (optional)**

### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

In a saucepan, combine the chicken broth and the water and bring to a slow simmer. In another saucepan, over medium-high heat, melt 2 tablespoons of the butter with the olive oil. When they are hot, add the shallots and saute until just translucent, about 2 minutes. Add the rice and stir until it is well coated, and nearly opaque, about 1 minute. Add 1/2 cup of the broth, reduce the heat to medium and stir until most of the broth is absorbed, about 4 minutes. Repeat, stirring in about 1/2 cup of broth at a time, until only a few tablespoons of broth remain, and the rice is soft and creamy, about 20-25 minutes total. Add 1 to 2 more tablespoons of the broth, add the remaining tablespoon of butter, the pepper and stir in the cheese. Gently stir in the figs and prosciutto, taste for salt and add if desired. Serve immediately.

Serves 4-5

**PER SERVING:** 390 calories, 10 g protein, 52 g carbohydrate, 15 g fat (7 g saturated), 29 mg cholesterol, 304 mg sodium, 2 g fiber.

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## Grilled Figs

This is one of my favorite things to do with figs, especially since our barbecue is installed next to one of our fig trees. Just before the pork chops or hamburgers or whatever else is grilling is almost ready, I pick a few figs, roll them in a bowl with some olive oil and add them to the grill.

### **INGREDIENTS:**

12 figs, stems trimmed

2 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil

### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

Preheat a gas grill or make a wood or charcoal fire. When the coals are hot, put the figs and the olive oil together in a bowl and turn to coat. Place on the grill and cook, turning, until the fruit is glistening and slightly puffed, about 2 or 3 minutes. Remove to a platter and serve hot or at room temperature.

**Serves 3-4 as a side dish**

**PER SERVING: 160 calories, 2 g protein, 37 g carbohydrate, 3 g fat (0 saturated), 0 cholesterol, 2 mg sodium, 6 g fiber.**

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### **Foil-Wrapped Pork Chops with Whole Garlic & Figs**

**This makes a hearty dish, one for big eaters, or a chop could be shared between two people. These foil packets can be prepared with indirect heat on a grill as well as baked in the oven.**

#### **INGREDIENTS:**

**2 teaspoons sea salt or kosher salt**

**1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper**

**2 teaspoons minced fresh sage**

**1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme**

**2 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil**

**16 figs, stems trimmed**

**Four 1-inch thick center-cut pork rib chops with bone, about 2 pounds total**

20 cloves fresh, firm garlic cloves (peeled)

4 sprigs sage

### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

Preheat an oven to 350°.

In a bowl combine the salt, pepper, sage and thyme and mix well. Lay out 4 sheets of heavy-duty aluminum foil about 12 inches by 16 inches. Put the olive oil in a bowl, then add the figs and turn well to coat. Lay a chop in the center of each piece of foil and season them equally with half the herb mix. Put 4 figs on top of each chop and season them with the remaining half of the herb mix. Tuck five cloves of garlic beneath or around the figs to make a snug bundle, garnish with a sage sprig, then fold the aluminum, corner to corner, to make a tight seal. Place the packets on a baking sheet and bake until the pork is opaque and just faintly pink in the center, about 55 minutes to 1 hour. Serve the packets on dinner plates, letting each diner open the packet.

Serves 4

PER SERVING: 400 calories, 35 g protein, 44 g carbohydrate, 10 g fat (3 g saturated), 93 mg cholesterol, 1,253 mg sodium, 7 g fiber.

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**Chicken Breast Stuffed with Figs & Goat Cheese**

**INGREDIENTS:**

**4 bone-in, skin-on chicken breasts, 1 1/2 pounds total**

**1 teaspoon sea salt or kosher salt**

**1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper**

**3 ounces soft goat cheese**

**1/2 teaspoon herbes de Provence or fresh minced thyme**

**2 tablespoons minced red onion**

**12 figs, stems trimmed**

**2 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil**

**1/3 cup Pinot Noir**

**2 teaspoons butter**

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

**Preheat oven to 350°.**



Make a lengthwise slit in the center of the thickest part of each chicken breast, about 3 inches long and 2 inches deep, creating a pocket for stuffing. Season the chicken inside and out with the salt and pepper. In a small bowl, mix together the goat cheese, herbes de Provence and onion. Finely chop 4 figs and add them to the goat cheese, gently mixing together. Trim the remaining 8 and cut them lengthwise into quarters; set aside. Stuff each chicken breast with one-quarter of the goat cheese mixture.

Over medium-high heat, heat the olive oil in a nonstick, ovenproof frying pan. When it is hot, place the chicken breasts skin side down and cook until golden, about 3 or 4 minutes. Turn the breasts over, then place the frying pan in the oven. Cook until the meat is opaque and the juices run clear when the thickest part of the breasts is pierced with the tip of a knife, about 45-50 minutes.

Remove the pan from the oven and remove the chicken breasts to a platter or to 4 individual dinner plates. Place pan over medium-high heat. Pour in the Pinot Noir, and scrape up any bits clinging to the pan. Continue to cook until the pan juices are reduced to about 1/4 cup, then add the figs. Continue to cook, letting the figs warm through, and the pan juices darken and thicken, 1-2 minutes. Stir in the butter. Pour the pan juices and some of the figs over each chicken breast and serve immediately.

Serves 4

**PER SERVING:** 365 calories, 32 g protein, 31 g carbohydrate, 12 g fat (6 g saturated), 86 mg cholesterol, 715 mg sodium, 5 g fiber.

## **Fig, Spinach & Arugula Salad**

Other greens as well as other nuts can be used, and pancetta or prosciutto can be substituted for the bacon. It is also good served with croutons topped with goat cheese and then broiled.

### **INGREDIENTS:**

4 slices lean bacon, fried + 1 teaspoon warm, liquid fat reserved

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

1 teaspoon apple cider balsamic vinegar or regular balsamic

2 teaspoons red wine vinegar

Salt and pepper to taste

2 cups baby spinach

2 cups baby arugula

8 figs, cut lengthwise into quarters

1/4 cup toasted almonds

## **INSTRUCTIONS:**

**Crumble the bacon and set aside.**

**In the bottom of a salad bowl, combine the olive oil, bacon fat, balsamic and red wine vinegar, and the salt and pepper and stir well.**

**Add the spinach and arugula and toss gently, then mound them on each of 4 salad plates. Sprinkle with the bacon, then top with the figs and garnish with the almonds.**

**Serve immediately.**

**Serves 4**

**PER SERVING: 245 calories, 6 g protein, 23 g carbohydrate, 16 g fat (3 g saturated), 7 mg cholesterol, 151 mg sodium, 6 g fiber.**

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## **Rosemary-Glazed Figs**

**The rosemary-infused syrup cooks the figs just long enough to plump and glaze them and to give them extra sweetness with a hint of peppery aftertaste. Use them as a dessert with ice cream, cake or cookies, or with a drizzle of heavy cream, or serve them as a side dish with roast meats.**

## **INGREDIENTS:**

**14 soft, ripe figs, stems trimmed**

**2/3 cup water**

**2 tablespoons sugar**

**2 sprigs rosemary**

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

Cut 2 of the figs in quarters. Put them in a saucepan with the water, sugar and rosemary and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low, stirring until the sugar dissolves. Add the remaining whole figs and gently cook them in the syrup, turning, until they are plump and glistening, and the syrup has become thick and is bubbling, about 5 to 7 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon to a bowl and let cool a few minutes. Serve warm.

**Serves 4**

**PER SERVING: 140 calories, 1 g protein, 37 g carbohydrate, 1 g fat (0 saturated), 0 cholesterol, 2 mg sodium, 6 g fiber.**

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**Fig & Anchovy Salad**

Sweet figs are always a good combination with salty foods, but I had never considered pairing them with anchovies until one night when I picked figs from my tree and the

pantry offered only anchovies. I thought, Why not? What a delicious surprise.

### **INGREDIENTS:**

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

3 teaspoons red wine vinegar

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

10 olive oil-packed anchovy fillets, drained

2 hearts of romaine

8 ripe figs, trimmed and cut lengthwise into quarters

### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

In the bottom of a large bowl, mix the olive oil, vinegar and pepper, then with a fork or pestle, crush 2 of the anchovy fillets into the mixture.

Cut the romaine hearts in half lengthwise, then in half crosswise, and gently turn them in the vinaigrette, keeping their shape as much as possible. Place two pieces on each of 4 salad plates. Garnish each with two anchovy fillets and fig quarters.

Serves 4

**PER SERVING:** 175 calories, 6 g protein, 22 g carbohydrate, 8 g fat (1 g saturated), 9 mg cholesterol, 377 mg sodium, 5 g fiber.

*Georganne Brennan divides her time between Yolo County and her cooking school in Provence. E-mail her at [food@sfchronicle.com](mailto:food@sfchronicle.com).*

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