


A photograph of a rustic wooden dining table with a bowl of fresh figs. The bowl is filled with several figs, some showing a mix of green and purple. The background is softly blurred, showing wooden chairs and a bright window. The text 'fresh figs' is overlaid in a large, elegant script font.

fresh figs

Don't miss out on the renaissance of this plump, sweet, and versatile "fruit." Story by Katherine Pearson | Recipes by Joanne Weir

A big, old fig tree crowded the smokehouse and, in the late afternoon, shaded the gravel drive just outside the back door of my family's farmhouse in West Tennessee. Old-timers call these "dooryard" figs, and while not native to the South, they were planted so long ago that it seems they've always been there. Our fig tree spread 10 feet wide and was just as tall by summer. When the first few figs of the season ripened, we began eating them right off the tree. The only cooking Mother did with them was to make fig preserves that brightened many a winter breakfast. So it was years later, after I had moved away from that tree and begun to cook on my own, that I realized the possibilities of fresh figs in other recipes. I still look forward to the first crop each year, but now I use figs in all kinds of sweet and savory dishes.

A glass of fig preserves and two English muffins topped with preserves on a dark plate.

Refrigerator Fig Preserves
(recipe on page 130)

Photography by Becky Luigart-Stayner | Styling by Jan Gautro



◀ Chicken Braised with Leeks and Figs

The sweetness of figs, balsamic vinegar, and honey cuts the richness of chicken thighs and drumsticks. White wine has a delicate flavor, making it a good cooking liquid that won't overpower the figs. Serve this saucy dish over couscous.

- 1 tablespoon butter
- 3 cups coarsely chopped leek (about 4 large)
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 4 (4-ounce) chicken drumsticks, skinned
- 4 (4-ounce) chicken thighs, skinned
- 2 cups dry white wine
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 6 parsley sprigs
- 1 thyme sprig
- 16 medium light-skinned fresh figs, halved (such as Kadota, Adriatic, or Panachee; about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds)
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
- Thyme sprigs (optional)

1. Melt butter in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add leek; sauté 5 minutes or until tender. Remove leek from pan, and set aside.

2. Combine flour, salt, and pepper in a large zip-top plastic bag. Add chicken; seal and shake to coat. Add chicken mixture to pan; cook 10 minutes, browning on all sides. Return leek to pan; add wine and the next 4 ingredients (through 1 thyme sprig). Bring to a boil; cover, reduce heat, and simmer 15 minutes. Add figs; simmer 10 minutes or until chicken is done. Remove the parsley sprigs and thyme sprig. Sprinkle with chopped parsley. Garnish with thyme sprigs, if desired. Yield: 4 servings (serving size: 1 drumstick, 1 thigh, 8 fig halves, and about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sauce).

CALORIES 387 (19% from fat); FAT 8.3g (sat 3.1g, mono 2.4g, poly 1.6g); PROTEIN 28.8g; CARB 52.4g; FIBER 7g; CHOL 110mg; IRON 4.2mg; SODIUM 607mg; CALC 127mg

Since moving to California, the largest fig-producing state, I enjoy lots of Black Mission, Brown Turkey, and Kadota figs from June through October. The sheer abundance of fresh figs promotes their use in a variety of dishes. But, like my mother, you may not have considered fresh figs as an ingredient for cooking—and with good reason. Although figs have been harvested for more than 5,000 years, only in the last decade have they come into their own in the United States as a tasty, adaptable ingredient. Whether figs were a part of your childhood, you don't want to miss out on this renaissance of the plump, flavorful "fruit." (Although we usually think of them as fruit, figs are actually flowers that turn in on themselves. The

tiny seeds inside are the real fruit.)

Fresh figs are best when simply prepared to enhance their natural sweetness, much like you might handle peaches or plums in season. That's the style of these recipes, which include main dishes that incorporate figs as a sweet complement to poultry and meat. To savor the honeyed taste of a fresh fig, however, it's critical that it be fully ripe. Figs don't ripen after picking, so buy only ripe ones, and use them as soon as possible (or refrigerate them for two days at most). It's easy to tell if a fig is ripe, but some of the telltale signs may surprise you.

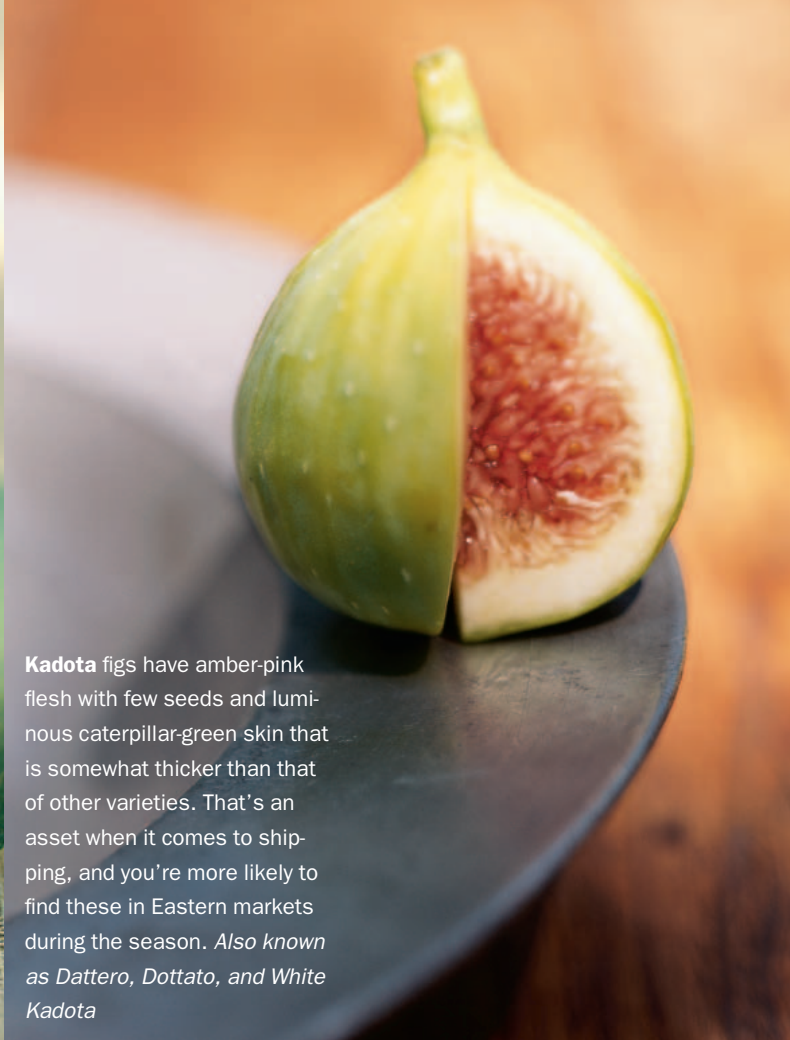
First, don't go by looks alone, says Judy Rodgers, author of *The Zuni Cafe Cookbook*.

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Black Mission is by far the most widely available fig in markets, especially in California (where they're grown) and in the Northeast (where figs must be shipped in). Stunningly beautiful, Black Missions possess deep-purple to black skin and watermelon-colored flesh. Also known as *California Black*, *Franciscan*, *Franciscana*, and *Negra*



Kadota figs have amber-pink flesh with few seeds and luminous caterpillar-green skin that is somewhat thicker than that of other varieties. That's an asset when it comes to shipping, and you're more likely to find these in Eastern markets during the season. Also known as *Dattero*, *Dottato*, and *White Kadota*



Brown Turkey is a beloved older fig grown in the West and the South and, with winter care, as far Northeast as Connecticut. It has a milder flavor than a Mission, and some say a sweeter taste. Brown Turkey figs have copper-colored skin, often with hints of purple, and white flesh that shades to pink in the center. Also known as *California Brown Turkey*, *San Pedro*, and *San Piero*



Adriatic figs have greenish-yellow skin and red flesh. They "eat like raspberry jam," says Bob Steinacher of Maywood Farms in Northern California. Also known as *Grosse Verte*, *Italian Strawberry*, *Nebian*, *Ventura*, *Verdone*, and *White Adriatic*



A shrunken and wrinkled fig may actually be a better choice than one that looks pristine. In years of buying figs for her restaurant, San Francisco's Zuni Cafe, Rodgers has found that shriveling indicates that the fruit has gotten enough sun to bring out its natural sweetness and concentrate the flavor, like a raisin. Cracking of the skin can result from too much rain or overwatering toward the end of the ripening stage, but small cracks don't affect the flavor. Second, test the fig's heft. Being heavy for its size is a sign of ripeness. "If a fig is light, like a cotton ball, it will be dry with little flavor," Rodgers explains.

Although Black Mission is her favorite variety, Rodgers says, "The character of the individual fruit on a given day always trumps the varietal traits." In

other words, buy the ripest figs available in your area. Farmers' markets and roadside stands are often the best sources for fresh figs, as they will have locally grown varieties at the peak of ripeness.

If your selection is limited, you can generally substitute any fresh local variety in most recipes. "Green figs are more subtle in flavor than purple or brown figs," Rodgers says. When serving raw figs for hors d'oeuvres or salads, varieties are pretty much interchangeable. But when cooking with figs, Rodgers advises staying as close as possible to the kind specified in the recipe. A good rule of thumb is to substitute a green or other light-skinned fig when a green fig is called for, and exchange a dark fig for any variety of dark fig that is specified.

Fresh Fig Salad with Crème Fraîche, Mint, and Prosciutto

You'll not only appreciate the simplicity of this salad, but you'll also love its flavor. Look for crème fraîche, thickened cream with a nutty flavor, near the gourmet cheeses. If your supermarket doesn't carry it, substitute whole sour cream.

- 1/3 cup crème fraîche
- 1 tablespoon water
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon rind
- 2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 24 small dark-skinned fresh figs, halved (such as Black Mission, Celeste, or Brown Turkey; about 2 pounds)
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh mint
- 3 very thin slices prosciutto, cut into 1/2-inch strips (about 1/2 cup)
- Mint sprigs (optional)

1. Combine first 6 ingredients, stirring well with a whisk.

2. Arrange figs on a platter. Drizzle with crème fraîche mixture. Sprinkle with chopped mint and prosciutto. Garnish with mint sprigs, if desired. Yield: 6 servings (serving size: about 1 cup).

CALORIES 169 (29% from fat); FAT 5.4g (sat 3.1g, mono 1.7g, poly 0.5g); PROTEIN 3.2g; CARB 29.8g; FIBER 5.1g; CHOL 14mg; IRON 0.7mg; SODIUM 214mg; CALC 81mg

Oven-Dried Figs

These dried figs are much softer and moister than store-bought dried figs. They are great for snacking, in salads, on pizza, or chopped and sprinkled over ice cream. Store them in an airtight container for up to 3 days.

- 10 medium light-skinned fresh figs, halved (such as Kadota, Adriatic, or Panachee; about 1 pound)

Cooking spray

1. Preheat oven to 250°.

2. Arrange figs in a single layer on a foil-lined baking sheet coated with cooking spray. Bake at 250° for 1 1/2 to 2 hours or until almost dry but still soft. Yield: 1 1/2 cups (serving size: 1/4 cup).

CALORIES 56 (3% from fat); FAT 0.2g (sat 0g, mono 0.1g, poly 0.1g); PROTEIN 0.6g; CARB 14.5g; FIBER 2.5g; CHOL 0mg; IRON 0.3mg; SODIUM 1mg; CALC 26mg



Fresh Fig Salad with Crème Fraîche, Mint, and Prosciutto



Flatbread with Oven-Dried Figs, Caramelized Onions, and Blue Cheese ▲

Rosemary-scented focaccia is topped with a tasty combination of sweet figs and caramelized onions, meaty walnuts, and pungent blue cheese. It's best served warm and would make a fine accompaniment to a grilled steak and green salad.

- 2¾ cups bread flour, divided
- 1 package dry yeast (about 2¼ teaspoons)
- 1 cup warm water (100° to 110°), divided
- 2 tablespoons extravirgin olive oil, divided
- 1 to 2 teaspoons chopped fresh rosemary
- 1½ teaspoons salt, divided
- Cooking spray
- 2¼ cups vertically sliced red onion
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ½ teaspoon grated orange rind
- ⅛ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ cup coarsely chopped walnuts
- 20 Oven-Dried Fig halves (page 126)
- ½ cup (2 ounces) crumbled blue cheese

1. Lightly spoon flour into dry measuring cups; level with a knife. Combine ½ cup flour and yeast in a large bowl, stirring with a whisk. Add ½ cup warm water; let stand 30 minutes. Add 2 cups flour, remaining ½ cup water, 1 tablespoon oil, rosemary, and 1¼ teaspoons salt; stir until a soft dough forms. Turn dough out onto a lightly floured surface. Knead until smooth and elastic (about 8 minutes), and add enough of remaining flour, 1 tablespoon at a time, to prevent dough from sticking to hands (dough will feel tacky).

2. Place dough in a large bowl coated with cooking spray, turning to coat top. Cover and let rise in a warm place (85°), free from drafts, 1 hour or until doubled in size. (Press two fingers into dough. If an indentation remains, the dough has risen enough.)

3. While dough rises, heat remaining 1 tablespoon olive oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add onion and sugar; cook 15 minutes or until deep golden brown, stirring mixture occasionally. Add remaining ¼ teaspoon of salt, orange rind, and pepper. Cool mixture slightly.

4. Preheat oven to 425°.

5. Punch dough down; form into a ball. Place dough on a baking sheet coated with cooking spray; let rest 5 minutes. Roll dough into a 14 x 12-inch rectangle (about ¼ inch thick). Arrange onion mixture, walnuts, and Oven-Dried Fig halves evenly over dough, leaving a ½-inch border on all sides. Sprinkle with cheese, and gently press toppings into dough to adhere. Bake at 425° for 20 minutes or until flatbread is golden brown and cheese melts. Yield: 14 servings (serving size: 1 piece).

CALORIES 160 (26% from fat); FAT 4.7g (sat 1.2g, mono 2g, poly 1.3g); PROTEIN 5g; CARB 26.6g; FIBER 2.3g; CHOL 3mg; IRON 1.5mg; SODIUM 309mg; CALC 40mg

Warm Salad of Grilled Figs, Grapes, and Bitter Greens

Grilling intensifies the sweetness of figs by caramelizing their natural sugars—a nice contrast to the bitterness of the radicchio and endive.

- 1½ tablespoons extravirgin olive oil, divided
- 2 tablespoons sherry vinegar or cider vinegar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cups torn radicchio
- 2 cups thinly sliced fennel bulb
- 2 cups sliced Belgian endive
- 2 cups seedless red grapes
- 12 medium dark-skinned fresh figs, halved (such as Black Mission, Celeste, or Brown Turkey; about 1¼ pounds)
- Cooking spray

1. Prepare grill to high heat.
2. Combine 1 tablespoon oil, vinegar, salt, and pepper in a large bowl. Add radicchio, fennel, endive, and grapes; toss gently to coat. Set aside.
3. Brush remaining 1½ teaspoons oil over cut sides of figs. Place figs on a grill rack coated with cooking spray; grill 1½ minutes on each side or until lightly browned. Place radicchio mixture on a

platter; top with grilled figs. Yield: 6 servings (serving size: about 1¼ cups).

CALORIES 154 (24% from fat); FAT 4.1g (sat 0.6g, mono 2.6g, poly 0.5g); PROTEIN 1.8g; CARB 31.3g; FIBER 5.2g; CHOL 0mg; IRON 1mg; SODIUM 219mg; CALC 66mg

Refrigerator Fig Preserves

Store these preserves in the refrigerator for up to a month. Test the thickness by spooning a little of the cooked fruit mixture onto a saucer. Place the saucer in the freezer for a few minutes; the mixture should firm to a jamlike consistency.

- ½ cup sugar
- ¼ cup water
- ¼ cup honey
- ¼ cup light-colored corn syrup
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- 20 medium light-skinned fresh figs, quartered (such as Kadota, Adriatic, or Panachee; about 2 pounds)

1. Combine all ingredients in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat; bring to a boil. Reduce heat, and simmer 50 minutes or until thick and syrupy, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat; cool completely. Yield: 2½ cups (serving size: 2 tablespoons).

CALORIES 78 (1% from fat); FAT 0.1g (sat 0g, mono 0g, poly 0.1g); PROTEIN 0.4g; CARB 20.5g; FIBER 1.5g; CHOL 0mg; IRON 0.2mg; SODIUM 20mg; CALC 16mg

Learn how to grow your own fresh figs at CookingLight.com/features.

Baked Figs and Nectarines over Ice Cream

This fruit mixture is also great over pound cake or angel food cake. If you have trouble finding late-harvest riesling, try gewürztraminer in its place.

- 12 medium light-skinned fresh figs, halved (such as Kadota, Adriatic, or Panachee; about 1¼ pounds)
- 3 nectarines, pitted and quartered
- ¼ cup late-harvest riesling or other sweet white wine
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 3 cups vanilla reduced-fat ice cream (such as Healthy Choice)

1. Preheat oven to 425°.
2. Arrange fresh figs and nectarines in a single layer in a 13 x 9-inch baking dish. Pour wine over fruit, and drizzle with honey. Sprinkle evenly with sugar. Bake at 425° for 25 minutes or until the fruit begins to brown. Serve warm with vanilla ice cream. Yield: 6 servings (serving size: about ½ cup fruit mixture and ½ cup ice cream).

CALORIES 271 (9% from fat); FAT 2.6g (sat 1.1g, mono 0.7g, poly 0.2g); PROTEIN 4.3g; CARB 58.3g; FIBER 5.3g; CHOL 5mg; IRON 0.6mg; SODIUM 47mg; CALC 136mg



Figs have long been prized for their luscious taste and sensuous appeal. Some enthusiasts argue that it was a fig, not an apple, that tempted Eve in the Bible. In Genesis, Adam and Eve “sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.”

Other religious traditions are linked to figs. The prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam, is said to have declared, “If I should wish a fruit brought to Paradise, it would, certainly, be the fig.” The fig tree also played a part in the birth of Buddhism. Siddhartha Gautama’s revelation, which became the foundation of the religion, came to him while he was sitting beneath a Bo tree, a species of fig.

The Romans held figs in high regard and planted them in all the lands they conquered, including what are now France and England. Pliny, a Roman writer in the first

century A.D., wrote, “Figs are restorative. They increase the strength of young people, preserve the elderly in better health, and make them look younger with fewer wrinkles.” But the seductive taste of the fig was Cleopatra’s undoing. Knowing she would reach for a delectable fig, her enemies hid an asp in a basket of them.

The Black Mission fig is closely tied to the history of California. Spanish missionaries planted figs at the San Diego Mission in the mid-18th century and subsequently at every mission north of there.

Fig lore persists today. “It’s strange; people come to my booth, taste a fig, and then tell their life story to me,” says Bob Steinacher of Mayfood Farms in Northern California. “Everybody has a story of a fig that was part of their own family history.”

PLEASE SEE PAGE 240 FOR MORE RECIPES

Spiced Fig Upside-Down Cake

Cooking spray

- 2 tablespoons butter, melted
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- 10 medium dark-skinned fresh figs, halved (such as Black Mission, Celeste, or Brown Turkey; about 1 pound)
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
- ¼ teaspoon ground mace
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- ⅓ cup butter, softened
- ¾ cup packed brown sugar
- ½ cup light molasses
- 2 large egg yolks
- ½ cup 1% low-fat milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 large egg whites

1. Preheat oven to 350°.

2. Coat a 9-inch round cake pan with cooking spray. Coat bottom of pan with melted butter, and sprinkle with 3 table-

spoons sugar. Arrange fig halves over sugar, cut sides down. Set aside.

3. Lightly spoon flour into dry measuring cups; level with a knife. Combine flour and next 6 ingredients (through salt), stirring with a whisk. Place ⅓ cup butter and ¾ cup brown sugar in a large bowl, and beat with a mixer at medium speed until blended. Add molasses and egg yolks; beat well. Beat in milk and vanilla. Add flour mixture to butter mixture; stir with a whisk just until blended.

4. Place egg whites in a medium bowl; beat with a mixer at high speed until stiff peaks form. Gently fold egg whites into batter; spoon over figs in prepared pan. Bake at 350° for 55 minutes or until a wooden pick inserted in center comes out clean. Cool 15 minutes in pan on a wire rack. Loosen cake from sides of pan using a narrow metal spatula. Place a plate upside down on top of cake; invert onto plate. Yield: 10 servings (serving size: 1 wedge).

CALORIES 323 (28% from fat); FAT 9.9g (sat 5.7g, mono 2.9g, poly 0.6g); PROTEIN 4.1g; CARB 56.5g; FIBER 2.2g; CHOL 66mg; IRON 2.5mg; SODIUM 246mg; CALC 149mg

Pork Stew with Pearl Onions, Green Olives, and Figs

Green figs, such as Kadota, hold up better when cooked than darker-skinned varieties. You could also make this stew with boneless, skinless chicken thighs in place of the pork.

- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- 2 cups finely chopped onion
- 1 cup chopped carrot
- 2½ tablespoons all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 pounds boneless Boston butt pork roast, trimmed and cut into bite-sized pieces
- 3 cups fat-free, less-sodium chicken broth
- 1½ cups frozen pearl onions (about 7 ounces)
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh oregano
- ½ teaspoon chopped fresh thyme
- 2 bay leaves
- ½ cup pitted green olives
- 12 medium light-skinned fresh figs, halved (such as Kadota, Adriatic, or Panachee; about 1¼ pounds)

1. Heat olive oil in a Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add chopped onion and carrot; sauté 5 minutes or until tender. Remove from pan; set aside.

2. Combine flour, salt, and pepper in a large zip-top plastic bag. Add pork; seal and shake to coat. Add pork mixture to pan; cook 10 minutes, browning on all sides. Return carrot mixture to pan. Add broth and next 6 ingredients (through bay leaves); bring to a boil. Cover, reduce heat, and simmer 45 minutes. Stir in olives and figs; cook 15 minutes or until pork is tender. Remove and discard bay leaves. Yield: 6 servings (serving size: about 1 cup).

CALORIES 372 (28% from fat); FAT 11.4g (sat 3.3g, mono 5.8g, poly 1.3g); PROTEIN 26.4g; CARB 35.7g; FIBER 5g; CHOL 76mg; IRON 2.6mg; SODIUM 776mg; CALC 88mg



Katherine Pearson, founding editor of Coastal Living, lives in the San Francisco Bay area, where she planted her own Brown Turkey fig tree. Joanne Weir is the author of several cookbooks, including her latest, Weir Cooking in the City.