

APPLE DESSERTS

As the weather starts to turn cool and fall is definitely in the air, it's time to think about one of my favorite weekend trips—next door in El Dorado County. Every year around this time I go up to Apple Hill. I've been doing it for a number of years now, and have been to pretty much all the places. Naturally, some have become favorites that I return to every year.

Besides great apples and apple cider, you can get some wonderful baked goods, including apple pies and tarts, baked apples, and caramel-coated apples. I love apples. You can do so many things with them. One of the easiest desserts is simple baked apples.

Preheat your oven to 400 degrees. Peel three nice large firm apples. I like Fujis for this, or Golden Delicious. Quarter the apples and cut away the core. Arrange the apples, cored side down, in a buttered baking dish and brush them with about 2 teaspoons of melted butter. Sprinkle a tablespoon of sugar over the apples, and place the apples in the oven and bake for about 10 or 15 minutes, until soft. Before serving, run them briefly under the broiler, watching all the time so that the sugar starts to caramelize but doesn't burn. Serve, garnished with whipped or sour cream.

Apple stew is a quick and easy dish to make. Take about 6 apples—I like a mixture, including Fuji, Rome Beauty, Granny Smith, and Golden Delicious. Don't peel the apples, but cut them into quarters and remove the core. Put the apples in a saucepan with 2/3 cup of jam, (apricot works well but any kind will do), 2/3 cup of water, a tablespoon of unsalted butter and ¼ cup of walnut pieces or slivered almonds. Bring the mixture to the boil, cover, reduce the heat to low and cook over low heat for about half an hour. Let cool to room temperature, and serve with some vanilla ice cream. The unpeeled apples have a wonderful chewy texture, and left-over apple stew can be put in the food processor to make delicious apple sauce.

For a slightly different variation, mix together in a large non-reactive saucepan 3 tart apples, peeled, halved, cored and cut into ½ inch wedges, along with 3 Bartlett pears, peeled, halved, cored and cut into 1 inch pieces, plus 10 dried apricots, cut in half, 1/3 cup of dried cranberries, 1 cup of water, and 1/3 cup honey. Grate about a teaspoon of rind from a lime, then squeeze the juice from the entire lime into the saucepan and add the grated lime rind. Grate about a tablespoon of orange rind, and squeeze the juice from the orange into the pan and add the grated orange rind.

Bring the mixture to the boil over high heat, stirring well to dissolve the honey. Reduce the heat to low, cover and simmer for about 10 minutes. Set the mixture aside to cool to room temperature, then cover and refrigerate overnight. Serve cold in small bowls. This serves about 6 people.

And for the world's easiest Apple Brown Betty, preheat your oven to 400 degrees. Take six apples, whatever kind you like, don't peel them but cut them in half, core them, and cut each half into 3 pieces. Put the apple pieces in a large bowl, together with five slices of firm white bread, torn into about 2-inch pieces, a stick of melted unsalted butter, ½ cup of apricot jam, 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon, ¼ cup sugar, 1/3 cup raisins or dried cranberries, and ½ cup of apple cider. Mix well and pack into a 6-cup oval gratin dish. You want lots of surface, as the top caramelizes nicely.

Put the dish on a cookie sheet to catch any boil-overs, and bake in your preheated 400 degree oven for about 45 minutes, until the top is nicely browned and caramelized. Cool the dish until lukewarm, and serve topped with some sour cream.

And don't forget the apple cider. When I was in college, we used to serve a drink called stone fences, which is a shot of bourbon over ice in a tall glass, with the glass filled up with apple cider. And if the apple cider has turned slightly spritzzy, so much the better! This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.