

FIGS

I have a fairly brown thumb, and have rarely been able to grow things successfully. But I have a fig tree out back that after years of producing only a handful of figs is this year just loaded. And the figs it produces are very good indeed—black, sweet and incredibly flavorful. I used to go up to Apple Hill to one of the orchards that also had a fig tree to get my fresh figs, but this year I hope I'll have all I can use from my own back yard.

As a kid I didn't much care for figs, but they've become one of my favorite foods. I'm lucky to have my own fig tree, but for those of you without one, you can often find tree-ripened fresh figs at the Farmers Market. Figs are ripe when they're soft to the touch with just a bit of resistance. They also often start to dry up just a little bit while still on the tree, and those figs taste like a mouthful of fig jam.

Indigenous to western Asia, figs were distributed throughout the Mediterranean basin by man and may in fact be the oldest cultivated crop. Archaeologists in Israel have recently discovered figs that were grown over 11,000 years ago—and because they were of a mutation that could not reproduce naturally, scientists believe that these figs were planted and cultivated intentionally—1000 years before the next crops, wheat and rye. They feature prominently in Greek and Roman mythology and history, and even Cleopatra ended her life with the bite of a snake concealed in a basket of figs. Along with olives and nuts, figs are one of the original foods of Western civilization.

The first figs in the New World were planted in Mexico in 1560, and came to California when the San Diego Mission was established by Fr. Junipero Serra in 1759. Figs were planted at each succeeding mission, heading northwards. The popular black Mission fig takes its name from these trees. The other most common California variety, the golden brown Calmyrna, is the Smyrna variety that was brought to California from Turkey in the 1880s.

Dried figs make a wonderful snack, especially when paired with some almonds. A "figgy" pudding is a traditional English dessert, and Fig Newtons were one of the earliest commercial cookies. I like figs eaten just out of hand, or sliced with some cream for breakfast. Or cut them in half lengthwise, top each half with a small piece of feta cheese and a dab of honey and pop them under the broiler until the cheese starts to melt. Thin slices of prosciutto or other smoked ham wrapped around fresh figs makes a wonderful first course. Try stewing some dried figs in some port, served with a dab of whipped cream on top for an elegant dessert. Or stew the dried figs in some orange juice with a cinnamon stick and some slivers of orange peel. Figs are often cooked in pies, puddings, cakes, bread and pastries.

Try this recipe for baked figs. Preheat your oven to 350 degrees. In a small saucepan, make a simple syrup by boiling 6 tablespoons in ½ cup of water, until the liquid is reduced to ¼ cup. Stir in about half a cup of sweet Marsala wine. Snip the stems from 8 fresh figs, and quarter the figs from the top down, almost to, but not quite through the bottoms. Press up from the bottom to spread the figs open like a flower, and place the figs in a shallow baking dish. Spoon the Marsala syrup over the figs and bake until the figs are tender, about 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, mix together 6 tablespoons of ricotta cheese, or Mascarpone cheese if you can find it—Andrae's Bakery often carries it—6 tablespoons heavy cream, and a teaspoon of sugar. When the figs are done, place each baked fig flower on a little plate, add a dollop of the cheese mixture in the center, spoon some of the syrup around, and if you're being really fancy, get a piece of bittersweet chocolate and with a vegetable peeler, sprinkle some shavings over the top. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.