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Life / Food & Wine

Fresh bites: Figs

Eating a voluptuous fig straight from the tree is an incredible experience, says restaurateur Rob Gentile.

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CYNTHIA DAVID PHOTO

A green fig growing in Northern Italy last month.

By: Cynthia David Special to the Star, Published on Wed Oct 14 2015

As a kid, Julian Sarraino remembers being curious about the weird fruit his father and grandfather ate while visiting family in Sicily.

“Once I started eating them, I thought, ‘Wow, this is really good, not too sweet and with a great texture,’” says Sarraino, vice-president marketing and sales for Fresh Taste at the Ontario Food Terminal.

Depending on the season, the family-run importing company sells green and black figs from Italy, Greece, Turkey, Israel, California and Mexico. They’re so fragile, most arrive by air.

The backyards of many Italian families have a sprawling fig tree with wide leaves. The fruits sprout like little balloons from the ends of branches, and may produce a single drop of nectar when perfectly ripe.

Rob Gentile, chef-owner of a trio of Buca restaurants, says eating a voluptuous fig straight from the tree is an incredible experience.

“You should eat it sitting down,” Gentile says, “and reflect on how good it is.”

While he says finding a truly delicious fig in Toronto can be frustrating, that doesn't stop him from cooking with them. He poaches the fresh fruit in sugar syrup with grappa and espresso for his brunch menus, and insists that figs, pork blood and chocolate, a regional Italian specialty, make a “heavenly” combination.

At the world Expo in Milan last month, I asked Michelin-starred chef Matteo Vigotti of Peck for his favourite fig dish. He enthusiastically described his warm fig ravioli, perfumed with a few drops of Ligurian olive oil and traditional balsamic vinegar from Modena and served with sliced prosciutto di Parma. He also makes a tarte tatin of caramelized figs scented with cardamom dust.

But don't think figs need to be complicated. Sarraino's favourite snack is a bagel or slice of toast smeared with cream cheese and topped with mashed fig halves. Easy and delicious.



A black fig growing in California.

Figs by the numbers

More and more Canadians are discovering figs, says Karla Stockli, CEO of the California Fig Advisory Board. In 2014 we imported \$15 million (4,423 tons) of fresh and dried California figs, \$2.2 million more than 2013. Fibre-rich figs are also appearing on more menus, Stockli says, in dishes ranging from pizza to ice cream.

Buy and store

- Turkish and Greek figs are winding down, but look for California sierra, brown turkey and Black Mission figs through November. Each variety has a different flavour.
- Select plump, fragrant figs that have a little give when touched.
- Figs that are mushy, misshapen or smell slightly sour are past their prime.
- Eat as soon as possible or refrigerate in plastic for several days.

Prep

- Wash, remove stem end and enjoy fresh figs skin and all.
- Freeze whole, sliced or peeled figs on a baking sheet in a single layer then store in a freezer bag or sealed container up to a year.

Serve

- Add fresh figs, halved or quartered, to a fall salad of bitter greens.
- Cut up fresh figs over cereal or yogurt.
- Sprinkle lightly with sugar and sear fig halves in a hot skillet. Serve on toasted baguette slices with crumbled blue cheese and bacon.
- Cut fig vertically almost to bottom, add a dab of blue cheese, encircle with prosciutto, skewer and sear until cheese melts and meat crisps.
- Garnish a wooden board of authentic Italian cured meats with fresh fig halves.
- Think fig salsa, sauce, chutney, jam and euro-style tarts.
- Poach figs in sugar syrup for 10 minutes; let cool in syrup. They're amazing with ice cream.
- Substitute figs in traditional peach and pear recipes.
- Simmer dried figs with other dried fruits for a delicious breakfast compote.



TIM TURNER

Garnish with sliced prosciutto and arugula. Serve warm or at room temperature.

California Fig Pizza

Serve small wedges of this rich pizza when guests arrive. Adapted from the California Fig Advisory Board.

Caramelized Shallots:

2 tbsp (30 mL) butter

5 shallots, peeled and sliced thin

1 tbsp (15 mL) molasses

2 tbsp (30 mL) sherry or balsamic vinegar

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Pizza:

400 g fresh pizza dough, at room temperature, cut in half

4 fresh figs, sliced $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (.5 cm) thick

1 tbsp (15 mL) extra virgin olive oil

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

2 oz (60 g) goat cheese, crumbled

2 tbsp (30 mL) grated or shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

4 thin slices prosciutto di Parma, cut in strips

Garnish with arugula sprigs

For caramelized shallots, melt butter in large saucepan and cook 5 to 10 minutes or until soft and golden brown. Stir in molasses and vinegar; season to taste with salt and pepper. Cook, stirring, until liquid is absorbed. Set aside.

Place pizza stone or heavy baking sheet in oven and preheat to 500F (260C).

Place half the dough on a 12x12-inch (30x30 cm) piece of parchment paper. Roll into a 9-inch (23 cm) circle with lightly floured rolling pin. Brush with half the olive oil and spread half the caramelized shallots over all, leaving a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch (1 cm) border.

Arrange slices from two figs $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch (1 cm) apart over shallots and season lightly with salt and pepper. Sprinkle half the goat cheese and 1 tbsp (15 mL) Parmigiano evenly over all. Transfer sheet with pizza to preheated pan and bake 10 to 15 minutes or until cheese and edge of crust are lightly browned.

Repeat with second pizza or bake both at the same time.

Transfer to cutting board, cool slightly then cut in wedges. Garnish with sliced prosciutto and arugula. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Makes two 9-inch (23 cm) pizzas.