

## Pears - perfect for summer dining

by Tonya Jennings - On the Ridge Cooking School, Kureelipa.

The pear is a member of the rose family! It has been cultivated for almost 3000 years and was spread through Europe by the ancient Greeks. Pears have been grown in Australia since the arrival of the First Fleet, and fortunately we still grow many varieties.

Among the most well-known are the Beurre Bosc, an elongated, brown skinned pear with a distinct neck that is the preferred choice for long cooking like poaching or baking; the William, also known as the Bartlett, a quick-ripening pear, green when unripe and lightening to yellow as it ripens; and Packham's Triumph, a variety developed in Australia which is our most widely cultivated pear. This excellent cooking pear is large, with a bumpy, green skin which slowly turns yellow when ripening, which may take up to eight days.

Other varieties in fruit shops include the Corella, which is a delicious accompaniment to cheese. It has a crisp, tropical flavour, with a green skin streaked with red and gold; it is unusual because it may be eaten hard or soft, and stores for weeks in a refrigerator.

The Winter Nelis, available in winter! is perfect for poaching and baking; the Cocktail Pear, a tiny pear originating from the Mediterranean countries is most suitable for pickling whole; and the Asian Nashi pear, which, although crisp and juicy like an apple, tastes like a pear.

It is not, as most people think, a cross between an apple and a pear, but a separate Asian species

brought to Australia by the Chinese gold miners of the 1850s. Interestingly, Nashi pears do not turn brown as quickly as the other varieties when cut.

If you are fortunate enough to have a pear tree growing in your garden, the fruit should be picked when fully mature but still green, allowed to ripen indoors and stored in a cool, dry place. When they are ready to be picked, the fruit should come away from the branch easily in your hand, with the stalk remaining on the fruit. Pears are unusual in that they ripen from the inside out and should not be allowed to ripen on the tree or the flesh tastes floury or mealy.

When buying pears, they should be bought green and ripened at home. Select pears that have no blemishes, cuts or bruises. Like avocados, a good tip is to ripen them by placing them in a brown paper bag with a banana – the ethylene in the banana speeds up the ripening process. Not all pears change colour when ripening, so test for ripeness by pressing gently on the flesh at the neck end, around the stalk. It should give under moderate pressure. When ripe, they bruise very easily, so need careful handling. They need oxygen circulating around them or they will rot from the core, so they should never be tightly packed together.

Pears should be cut with a sharp, stainless steel knife and sprinkled with a little lemon juice if not being used immediately; otherwise the flesh oxidises and turns brown.

Another tip, depending of your intended use, is

to coat them with olive oil as this also stops them browning.

Pears can be eaten raw, with cheese, in fruit salads, pickled, dried, made into chutneys, baked or poached, cooked in puddings, crumbles, tarts, pies, cakes, puréed into sorbets and even be made into wine and liqueurs. A number of Australian producers make their own delicious pear liqueurs.

Pears work equally well in sweet or savoury dishes. A classic food combination is pear and cheese, such as Roquefort, Stilton, gorgonzola, goat's cheese or Parmigiano Reggiano.

They are delicious served as a salad with greens like rocket, roasted walnuts and walnut or Roquefort vinaigrette. Grilled haloumi also works well. Pears in salads may be raw, grilled or pan-fried with some butter, until they are lightly caramelised. For another flavour dimension, add honey, orange-blossom water, cardamom and sherry to the melted butter.

Most popular is to gently poach pears, usually in sugar syrup, or in sparkling or still red or white wine, with a vanilla bean, lemon zest, cinnamon and cloves. They can be baked, sprinkled with a little sugar and a knob of butter and then served with ice cream or thick cream; or stewed gently to make a fruit compote. When choosing pears for cooking, it is best to use slightly under-ripe fruit; otherwise you run the risk of the pear disintegrating as you cook it.

Pear with chocolate is an excellent food match.



Poires Belle Hélène is a stunning, traditional French dessert, created by Escoffier, the great French chef who also created Pêche Melba. It is simply a poached pear served with a rich chocolate sauce. Poached pears topped with white chocolate mousse and dark chocolate mousse is always a winner when it is made at On the Ridge.

Other ways to enjoy pears are in the various pear tarts, such as the pear 'tart tatin'; and try crisping them in the oven to make pear wafer 'biscuits'. On my recent visit to France I attended a food photography course in the Vendée, where we prepared and photographed a Poached Pear with Warm Butterscotch Sauce Verrine...so simple, yet stunning.

You will find the recipe in the dessert section on the website at [www.ontheridge.com.au](http://www.ontheridge.com.au)

