

The fruit from the tree of life

by Tonya Jennings

All the seasons bring us their special fresh fruits and vegetables. It is nature's way of ensuring that we have a varied diet. Summer is always much anticipated for its delicious fresh fruits – all the berries, stone fruits, tamarilloes, persimmons, pomegranates and the sweetest and oldest of them all – figs.

The fig – *figus carica* – is one of the most ancient fruits known to mankind, reported as being under cultivation back in 3000–2000BC in the eastern Mediterranean region, where the ancient Egyptians called it the 'Tree of Life'. Today the main fig producers are the Mediterranean countries – Turkey, Greece and Italy; the North African countries – Algeria, Syria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia; and also in modern times, California.

The fig is one of the sweetest and most versatile fruits. They are delicious and nutritious, whether eaten fresh or dried, and work well in savoury and sweet dishes. Interestingly, about 80% of figs are eaten dried; this is probably because fresh figs have a very limited season and are very perishable. They must be left to ripen on the tree long enough to taste and look good, and then once picked must be consumed within two to three days. Our local figs are a taste sensation as they are picked when full of flavour and with great colour. Figs supplied to the supermarkets must be picked early, before the flavour and colour has been well developed.

'The Fig Lady', Marie Shires, in Shires Lane, Woombye, is my local supplier. For the past 15 years or so, Marie has supplied local restaurants and the community with the most delicious, fresh, juicy figs – figs picked that morning from their trees. Our fig season is between January and April and each year I really look forward to seeing the 'fresh figs' signs around and make the best use of their limited availability. Check the On the Ridge website for Marie's fig jam, and figs in syrup recipes.

Try adding fresh figs to a light salad; or fill them with goat's cheese or gorgonzola, wrap them in prosciutto, sprinkle with sesame seeds and eat fresh as finger food or bake them to create a stunning entrée. Pickled or grilled they are delicious served as an accompaniment to a main meal of duck or chicken.

They are luscious and succulent in desserts; in our cooking classes we frequently poach them slowly in sugar syrup or in red wine with sugar, orange zest, cinnamon, cloves and black peppercorns; they are sumptuous as a tart, sliced over our frangipane and baked, and delicious simply slit across in quarters and drizzled with honey and sugar, then grilled, and served with ice cream or yoghurt. They are a marvellous addition to a cheese platter next to ripe double brie. Dried figs can be used in cakes, puddings and biscuits, or poached as a dessert.



Check the On the Ridge website for our fig and frangipane tart recipe.

The fig tree is deciduous and sub-tropical, and produces best in warm, dry regions, as long as its roots are watered well. Figs grow well on the Sunshine Coast and Gatton, and in the Riverland area of South Australia. Amazingly, in my garden in Brighton, Victoria, I had two prolifically bearing fig trees and loved making pots of jam. How I miss those beautiful trees!

Contact Tonya at On the Ridge Cooking School on 5441 3715 or go to www.ontheridge.com.au for recipes and more information.

On the Ridge Cooking School
Teaching Modern Australian Cuisine


On the Ridge
Modern Cuisine

Class details call 5441 3715 or 0412 838 323
info@ontheridge.com.au
www.ontheridge.com.au

Create Cook Celebrate