

Taste!

Forbidden fruit

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kadota, brown turkey and white Adriatic versions (the latter of which are unique to and popular along the East Coast), there's a type to suit every cook and every type of dish.

Regardless of the type you choose to cook or bake with, however, "all bring a natural sweetness to dishes," Cappello said, and, because they pair nicely with nutty, salty, citrus or sweet flavors as well as a range of textures, "they're extremely versatile and well-suited to a broad range of appetizers, entrees and desserts."

Cappello marries figs with nuts and cured meats such as pancetta or cooked ham as well as salty aromatics such as capers and olives. On the other hand, he said, "figs are great with citrus flavors like lemon or orange as well as balsamic or sherry wine vinegar. They also go well with dishes incorporating heavy cream, mascarpone, or crème fraiche, aged cheeses like bleu or Reggiano Parmigiana, or wine, brandy, port, rum or other liquors that are fortified."

To demonstrate the versatility of figs, Cappello and his executive chef Dagoberto Sanchez, offered a fig and prosciutto salad as an appetizer. Between the saltiness of the cured meat and Grana Padana cheese and the dual sweetness of the figs and balsamic vinegar, this dish serves up an appealing and balanced flavor profile that has secured it a permanent place on the restaurant's menu year-round.

For an entree, Cappello and Sanchez created a pan-seared salmon with caramelized onions and figs in a white wine, butter and lemon sauce, which again balances the sweetness of onions and figs with the cream and citrus of the sauce. The team's creative trio of fig dishes concluded with mouth-watering, chocolate-dipped figs accompanied by mascarpone cheese infused with pure vanilla extract.

"This is a simple dessert that presents beautifully on a dish and tastes superb," Cappello said.



Owner Tom Cappello (right) and Dagoberto Sanchez, executive chef of Gaetano's Italian Restaurant, prepare dishes made with figs. BOB BIELK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

For Gerri Farina, prepared foods chef at Nature's Corner Natural Market in Spring Lake Heights, "figs remind me of late summer into autumn and of my Italian ancestors, who grew fig trees in their yards. Growing up, there were always bowls of figs on our table, and after a meal we'd slice them up and eat them with nuts and cheese."

Farina still treasures a family recipe for fresh fig and goat cheese wedges with a balsamic reduction.

"I love to use black mission figs for this recipe based on their nice aroma and deep flavor, along with a soft cheese like goat cheese," she said. "It's an elegant-looking but easy appetizer to make for a dinner party, and people love it."

On top of their pleasing taste, figs offer much in the way of nutrition. Free of fat, sodium and cholesterol, figs are rich in calcium, iron, phosphorus, potassium and fiber, and ancient Egyptians ate them to aid their digestion, based on their mild laxative properties. Far before that, figs were the subject of many biblical references.

"Figs are really just the inverted flower of the

fig tree if you turn them inside out," Cappello explained, "and many experts believe that figs, not apples, were the actual forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden."

According to Cappello, cooks can determine the ripeness of a fig by splitting it at the bottom like a "T"; if still tart, figs can be ripened inside at room temperature.

"Figs are so historical, and millions have eaten them around the world for the longest time. They're probably one of the oldest foods around," Cappello said. "They work well with so many different dishes and are great to enjoy fresh at Thanksgiving and then dried after the holiday."

"The bottom line," Cappello concluded, "is that figs are a delicious seasonal item worth exploring."

Gaetano's Italian Restaurant & Market is at 10 Wallace St. in Red Bank and can be reached at 732-741-1321 or www.gaetanosredbank.com. Nature's Corner Natural Market is at 2407 Route 71 in Spring Lake Heights and can be reached at 732-449-4950 or www.naturescorner.naturalmarket.com.

FIG AND PROSCIUTTO SALAD

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS:

16 figs, cut and quartered
16 slices prosciutto di Parma
1 pound mixed salad greens
16 slices Grana Padana cheese

For the dressing:

½ cup balsamic vinegar
¼ cup olive oil
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 teaspoon garlic
Salt and pepper to taste

DIRECTIONS:

» In a mixing bowl, combine mixed greens, figs, olive oil, balsamic vinegar, garlic, oregano, salt and pepper. Layer cheese and prosciutto slices on top and serve.

Courtesy Gaetano's Italian Restaurant & Market



FIGS AND GOAT CHEESE WITH BALSAMIC REDUCTION

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS:

12 fresh black mission figs
8 ounces goat cheese
½ cup balsamic vinegar
¼ cup sugar or agave
Fresh rosemary
Fresh black pepper to taste

DIRECTIONS:

» Cut figs lengthwise and place on baking sheet, cut side up. Add a teaspoon of goat cheese to each slice and broil for 5-7 minutes. In the meantime, prepare reduction by mixing balsamic, sugar or agave, and fresh rosemary in a saucepan, bringing to a boil, and then back to a simmer for 5-10 minutes to reduce (it will thicken slightly). Remove figs from broiler and drizzle each fig with sauce and fresh black pepper to serve.

Courtesy Gerri Farina, Nature's Corner Natural Market

CHOCOLATE-DIPPED FIGS WITH MASCARPONE CHEESE

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS:

16 fresh figs
1 cup chocolate, semi-sweet chips or nibs preferred
2 ounces water
8 ounces mascarpone cheese
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

DIRECTIONS:

» In a double boiler, combine the chocolate and water and whisk until smooth and fully incorporated. Dip the figs in the chocolate and place on a sheet pan lined with parchment paper. Refrigerate for 1 hour until the chocolate hardens. Blend mascarpone with vanilla extract and serve alongside figs.

Courtesy Gaetano's Italian Restaurant & Market

PAN-SEARED SALMON WITH FIGS AND ROASTED RED PEPPERS

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS:

2 pounds salmon (cut in 4 pieces)
8 figs, cut into quarters
6 ounces diced roasted peppers
2 ounces white wine
1 ounce lemon juice
12 ounces clam juice
1 teaspoon butter dipped in flour
1-2 tablespoons olive oil
Semolina flour

DIRECTIONS:

» Lightly dust salmon filets with semolina flour and pan sear them in the olive oil for 3 minutes on each side. Prepare the sauce by combining the lemon juice, white wine, clam juice, butter, figs and roasted peppers in a separate sauté pan and simmer over medium heat for 5 minutes. Pour over salmon to serve.

Courtesy Gaetano's Italian Restaurant & Market

CITRUS

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CITRUS-GLAZED ASPARAGUS

Trim and steam 2 bunches of asparagus until bright green and just tender, about 5 to 7 minutes. In a small saucepan over medium heat, whisk together ¼ cup orange marmalade, 2 tablespoons lime juice, ½ teaspoon smoked paprika and ¼ teaspoon cumin. Bring to a simmer, then season with salt and pepper. Toss the asparagus in the glaze and sprinkle with toasted sesame seeds.

Serves 6.

Nutrition information per serving (values are rounded to the nearest whole number): 80 calories; 5 calories from fat (8 percent of total calories); 1 g fat (0 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 0 mg cholesterol; 16 g carbohydrate; 4 g protein; 4 g fiber; 170 mg sodium.

EASY CITRUS-HERB CRANBERRY SAUCE

Cut 3 clementines in half. Remove any seeds. In a processor, pulse the clementine halves until finely chopped. Add 1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme, 1 teaspoon chopped fresh marjoram and 1 tablespoon chopped chives. Pulse to mix, then transfer to a bowl and stir in a 14-ounce can whole-berry cranberry sauce. Season with salt and pepper. Serves 12.

Nutrition information per serving (values are rounded to the nearest whole number): 60 calories; 0 calories from fat (0 percent of total calories); 0 g fat (0 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 0 mg cholesterol; 15 g carbohydrate; 0 g protein; 1 g fiber; 5 mg sodium.

LEMON-ROSEMARY BREADSTICKS

In a small skillet over medium heat, melt 4 tablespoons of butter with the zest of 1 lemon and 2 tablespoons minced fresh rosemary. Cook for 1 minute. On a lightly floured surface, roll out a 20-ounce ball of purchased pizza dough to a 12-by-18-inch rectangle. Cut into 1-inch strips. Brush with the lemon-rosemary butter, then transfer to a lightly oiled baking sheet, twisting if desired. Allow to rest at room temperature for 20 minutes. Bake for 20 minutes at 350 degrees. Serves 12.

Nutrition information per serving (values are rounded to the nearest whole number): 140 calories; 50 calories from fat (36 percent of total calories); 6 g fat (3 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 10 mg cholesterol; 20 g carbohydrate; 3 g protein; 1 g fiber; 160 mg sodium.

Recipes by Alison Ladman



These breadsticks get brushed with a lemon-rosemary butter before being baked. ASSOCIATED PRESS

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