

Time to Bag the Apples--Berry Season is Here

By Gena Bell

Her teeth sink gently into the plump, sweet, red ripe flesh and the juices slowly roll down her chin. No, this isn't another Danielle Steele novel. It's fresh berry season, and it's time to turn in those winter fruits for succulent summer strawberries, raspberries and blueberries. There are so many things you can do with fresh berries, from fresh summer desserts to juicy ripe sauces to using them as a topping—or you can just eat them solo.

Summer desserts. Now this is a topic near and dear to our hearts. Who doesn't love a flaky, buttery biscuit topped with juicy macerated (fancy term for mashed up berries with a little sugar) strawberries and a dollop of whipped cream? Strawberry shortcake has been an American tradition for years, especially on special occasions such as Mothers Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day. But do we need a special day to make a wonderful berry creation? I don't think so.

Creating luscious fruit tarts is another great way to take advantage of berry season. Make a Pate Sucree (French term for Sweet Pastry Crust) recipe and bake it until it is nice and golden brown. Next, fill it with sweet vanilla pastry cream and top it with blueberries, strawberries and raspberries in a uniform pattern. Glaze the top with warm apricot jam and there's an impressive and easy-to-make dessert. Or maybe it is time to step outside your comfort zone and create something unique like a Pavlova (see recipe), which is a crunchy meringue cloud filled with whipped cream and topped with a handful of juicy berries. The sensation in your mouth of all these different textures will send you into another realm.

Then there are all the wonderful sauces you can create with fresh ripe berries. Gently press any rich ripe berry through a fine mesh sieve and you have sweet dense berry juice that is ready to add to a chicken stock or reduce down slowly to drizzle over your favorite foie gras or dessert. Some of my favorites include: drizzling fresh blueberry juice over a Meyer lemon tart or a raspberry pan gravy over roast chicken. Try some new flavor combinations or just stick to your old favorites—but take advantage of these incredible creations while the berries are fresh.

And if you are not a home cook and just hate the thought of going into the kitchen, the easiest way to take advantage of berry season is to grab a handful and top them on your favorite breakfast cereal or bowl of ice cream. There is nothing like fresh vanilla ice cream topped with toasted almonds and fresh raspberries. I especially love a bowl of steamy oatmeal with a touch of cream and fresh blueberries on board.

Whatever your preference, don't miss out on this phenomenal berry season. Remember it only comes around once a year and berries are low in fat, cholesterol—and are even part of the Atkins diet. So splurge your way through this season and enjoy!

Pavlova

- 4 egg whites
- pinch of salt
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 Tablespoons cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 teaspoon vinegar
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 3 cups of your favorite berries



Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper or silpat. Beat the egg whites and the pinch of salt until stiff. Add half of the sugar slowly while continuing to beat the meringue until quite stiff and glossy, but not dry. Fold in remaining sugar with the cornstarch as lightly as possible. Fold in the vinegar and vanilla. Pile each meringue into a large mound in the center of the parchment-lined pan. Make an indentation with the back of the spoon on each mound. Bake the meringues in the oven for 1 to 1½ hours, or until the meringue is lightly browned and crisp. Let it cool completely. When cool, run a spatula underneath the meringue to disengage it from the pan.

Whip heavy cream with 4 tablespoons of sugar until thick. Mix berries in a bowl. To serve, put one Pavlova on a plate and place a large dollop of whipped cream in the center. Top with a mound of berries. Enjoy!

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