

the perfect pear

“There are only ten minutes in the life of a pear when it is perfect to eat.”

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

The quote above is pretty accurate, at least for Western varieties, as opposed to the naturally crisp/crunchy-when-ripe Asian types. Asian Pears, *Pyrus Pyrifolia*, are different, delectable critters. Because of their super succulent, crispy nature, they are typically eaten raw. The three most prominent varieties are the delicate, light yellow **20th Century**, the more richly flavored russeted gold **Hosui** and the green/buff **Shinko**.

Western Pears are botanical cousins to apples, and both of these fruits are actually *rose* family members. Dating back to ancient times, pear varieties now number over 1,000! Pears made it stateside in 1629, when the Massachusetts Company purchased pear seed from England. Because pears don't breed true to seed, from these first planting came many varieties distinct to America. Pears were so wildly popular in New England in the 19th century that historians described the local enthusiasm as “pearmania”. Today, commercial cultivation is strongest in California and the Pacific Northwest.

Pears are the only fruit which ripen off the tree. Most shippers sell firm fruit. Best plan is to order what you'll need a few days out and ripen them to your particular preference at room temperature-consistently warm but not too hot is ideal. To hasten ripening, cover pears along with an apple or two. The ethylene gas naturally given off by the apple will catalyze the process. Once ripe, pears do have a very short shelf life and are best eaten quickly. Check often as they transform from under ripe to over ripe quite quickly. They can be successfully refrigerated for several days.

Earliest varieties to come on are local **Delta Bartletts** (red and green) and **French Butter Pears**, usually in mid summer. These varieties possess a delicate floral flavor when ripe, and a soft tender flesh. The Green Bartletts are ripe when they take on a near yellow hue to their thin skin, often with a lovely red blush. The French Butters have a beautiful russeted skin-see these out early in the pear season because they are not good keepers and finish early on. Next come **D'Anjou**, the winter workhorse, in both red and green, along with the wonderfully creamy when ripe **Comice** (with blue cheese, heaven), and **Bosc**-sometimes called the “King of Pears”, which are best suited to poaching because of their firm when ripe texture. Remember the very small, beautiful **Forelle** (which means “trout” in German). This tiny pear has coloring similar to a rainbow trout. **Seckel** is another small variety, prized for its bold spicy flavor ... super honey sweet when ripe. We always search for a later maturing heirloom called **Winter Nellis**. When ripe, their brown russeted skin over a somewhat lumpy shape yields to a delightful syrupy sweet flesh.

Pears have a fine affinity with cheese. For cooking (aside from poaching) consider pear sauce vs. apple sauce, served alongside pork, or for dessert. A pear crisp, tart or crumble pie with a scattering of huckleberries or raspberries in the mix is always well received. Use in any combination with apples and quince ... they're all related and their different flavors play very well off one another. Consider an escarole and Belgian endive salad with pears as autumn progresses, with or without blue cheese and pecans. Put up some gingered pear relish, or a pongle up, a pear chutney, perfect paired with pork.

—Andrew J. Powning