

Los Angeles Times FOOD

Bartlett pears: How to choose, store and prepare



(Allen J. Schaben, Los Angeles Times)

We make a lot of fuss over heirloom peach varieties that date back to the 1960s and tomatoes that go back as far as the 1930s. But did you know that the Bartlett pear, that standard grocery store fruit, actually dates back to the 1770s? The Bartlett, called the Williams pear in England where it was first found, gets its name from Enoch Bartlett, who was the first person to sell the trees in the U.S. in the early 1800s. "Barts" are the predominate pear grown in California, and there are two different growing sites with very different fruit. The earliest pears will start being harvested in August around the Sacramento delta area. They are fine, but the ones picked a couple of weeks later from the hilly orchards of Lake and Mendocino counties are much better.

How to choose: The best perfectly ripened Bartlett pears will be golden and fragrant and will have a slight softness at the neck. Don't worry if the fruit shows some russeting -- that's only skin-deep and doesn't affect the flavor.

How to store: Pears will continue to ripen off the tree (indeed, they really have to ripen off the tree to avoid a woody texture). So if your pears are a little green and firm, just leave them at room temperature and they'll finish up nicely. Then you can refrigerate them.

How to prepare: There's probably no finer fall dessert than a cheese board augmented with well-ripened Bartlett pears and new-crop walnuts. If you want to get really fancy, include a small bowl of a bitter honey.