

In Season: Fresh figs offer a sweet taste of early fall

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These figs are so ripe and ready to eat they've split open, revealing their sweet pink interior. (Photo by Lauren Duffy)

I can think of no more sensual a food than a perfectly ripe fig. On first bite, the fruit's luscious shape greets the lips like the soft lips of another. On the tongue, a moist, pillowy soft flesh gushes forth, peppered with a myriad of tiny seeds that crunch to the tooth and explode with moisture. Then the taste spreads across the tongue—the true test of ripeness. At it's peak, a fresh fig is complex, resonant, treating the palate to an intoxicating, balanced sweetness with a hint of tang and an almost savory note at the finish.

For all of their succulence, though, figs have a precariously short season. If you haven't experienced a fresh fig this season, go out in search of some now! Figs are harvested from late summer to early fall, with the peak season in San Diego from mid-August to mid-September. This time of year, you can find a smattering variety—look for the deep purple of Brown Turkeys or the pale green of Kadota figs.

Figs have been grown for thousands of years—one source dates them to 2900 B.C. Wild figs were first cultivated in Egypt and Greece, and slowly spread across the Mediterranean, Asia, and Europe. They were not introduced to the Americas until the 1500's, and not into California until the 1700's, yet they thrive in their late-adopted home. Figs grow best in a dry, warm climate—especially one with little rain during the summer—and the warm, dry summers of Southern California are ideal for fig production.

Figs are a member of the ficus family, and are a unique type of fruit called a syconium. The plump bulb of the fig fruit is hollow inside, with a small round opening near its bottom. Unlike many fruit trees, which display brilliant flowers in order to attract pollinators, the fig tree conceals its beauty within. As a fig forms, the outer part serves as a protective shield, allowing dozens of tiny flowers grow in the center of each fig. A special species of wasp pollinates the fig by crawling inside it's hollow core through an opening in the bottom. Next time you cut open a fig, take a moment to marvel at the brilliant ruby-colored interior—that's a miniature flower field you are looking at.

The easiest way to eat a raw fig is to simply grasp it by its stem (the tapered end), and take several bites until it is gone. You can also grasp the flesh near the stem and peel it back a section at a time. The stem itself is quite bitter, so

be sure to discard the stems before serving. If you can refrain from eating your figs fresh from the market, there are dozens of dishes that will showcase the complex flavor and pillowy texture of these unique flower-fruits.

Look For:

Figs range in color from light yellow to dark purplish-brown, but color indicates variety, not ripeness. Figs are at their sweetest when they are almost bursting open. Look for fruit with small cracks on the sides or bottom. You can also tell a fig's ripeness by touch—ready-to-eat figs are tender and have a slight give. A ripe fig will feel like a rubber ball in the palm of your hand (just don't squeeze too hard when testing this). Figs don't ripen well off the tree, so make sure to buy only ripe fruit at the store or market.



The variety of figs commonly available includes Brown Turkey, Black Mission, and pale Kadotas. (Photo by Lauren Duffy)

Store It:

Figs are best eaten within a day or two of purchasing, but will store in the fridge for up to 4 days. Bring to room temperature before serving. Cooked figs will keep for several more days.

Use it:

Figs are a versatile fruit—they work equally well in savory and sweet dishes. Their bursting sweetness makes them a perfect foil for rich meats like lamb or pork and cured meats like salumi, prosciutto, and ham. Their complexity makes for an intriguing tart, pie, or even ice cream topping. Try raw or cooked figs on sandwiches, add sliced figs to salads, or add chopped figs to a cheese or meat plate. The fig season is so short, so don't be afraid to use them over and over—before you know it they will be gone.

The Facts:

A medium fig (2" in diameter) has about 35 calories, very little protein, and no fat. Figs are high in fiber, with about 1 ½ grams per fig. They also have a very high mineral content for a fruit and are a good source of potassium, calcium, iron, and magnesium.

Bonus Points:

Both fresh and dried figs are a good source of phenolic antioxidants, which may help protect the body against some cancers, heart disease, and diabetes. Dark skinned figs generally have more antioxidants than their lighter counterparts.