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Sumptuous summer

Season's profusion of fruit creates endless dessert possibilities

By Maria C. Hunt

FOOD WRITER

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It's easy to be a pastry chef in the wintertime.

When it's chilly outside, the selection of seasonal and relatively local fruits is limited to apples, pears, citrus and persimmons, along with nuts. All that's required to make a great dessert is some imagination.

But as summer comes into view, pastry chefs approach that difficult time when the array of fruits explodes to include melons, berries, cherries, nectarines, apricots, peaches, plums and an endless variety of stone-fruit crosses.

With many of these delicious fruits at their peak for only a few weeks, chefs are scrambling to capture the fleeting taste of summer.

"It's the hardest season for me because there's so much to choose from," said Jack Fisher of Nine-Ten restaurant in La Jolla. "It all hits for a three-week period. It seems you have everything under the sun, and you have to pick and choose."

Fisher is especially excited about plums and Bing cherries that Nine-Ten will be getting from a farm in Julian. He will serve his signature panna cotta with an intense cherry balsamic reduction sauce, and he's pairing Santa Rosa plums with corn foam, caramel corn and olive-oil gelato.

James Foran, pastry chef at Arterra in the San Diego Marriott Del Mar, said summer produce keeps him busy changing the dessert menu often.

"You want to use so many ingredients in such a short amount of time," he said. "Summer is my favorite and least favorite (season) at the same time."

Foran's repertoire of summer desserts includes a crispy tapioca with strawberries and rhubarb that he created when he worked at Picasso in the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas; a strudel in which plums are enveloped in a crepe and phyllo, neatly capturing their juices; and a simple apricot galette made with puff pastry.

Foran likes the way the flavors in the apricot galette – a flat fruit tart – are complemented by the accompanying fig caramel and ginger ice cream.

"The fig caramel in it really helps cut the tartness of the apricots, and it has got the spiciness of the ginger ice cream," he said. "It has got a lot of dimensions to it and a lot of textures."

At Tartine, a Coronado bakery and cafe overlooking San Diego Bay, pastry chef Barbara Massey incorporates seasonal fruits into traditional desserts such as cherry cheesecake or rhubarb-apple crisp.

She has also been making lots of lemon curd tartlets, which she tops with raspberries. Her baked vanilla custard, crowned with raspberries and blueberries, sounds like it was born for the Fourth of July.

"It's kind of tart, kind of sweet; just something nice and light at the end of the day," said Massey, who learned to make pastries at the Cordon Bleu in Paris and worked at Postrio in San Francisco.

Thomas Gerard, the corporate pastry chef for the Ladeki Restaurant Group, is enthralled with the wild French strawberries that will be available soon, as well as summer melons.

"I really like the cantaloupe when it's ripe," Gerard said. "It's really watery, and I like it because you can play it sweeter or play it salted. You can do amazing cocktails with it, ices, carpaccio and soups. You can do so many things with one fruit."

Gerard, who created pastries for Patina in Los Angeles and for Alain Ducasse in New York, likes making somewhat complex desserts that mix fruits with herbs and spices. He has added a gingery cantaloupe soup with strawberry jelly and sesame tuile to the dessert menu at Fresh in La Jolla. He is also making a panna cotta with a summer berry syrup and fresh strawberries and raspberries.

Some pastry chefs believe that herbs make a natural pairing with summer fruits, following the principle that crops that grow together go together.

"There's lemon verbena, basil and those types of things that go together," Fisher said. "Just like tomatoes and basil grow

together."

Fisher said he likes the fresh, clean note that mint sorbet adds to his panna cotta with balsamic Bing cherries. He also has created a lemon verbena custard with roasted apricots and a honey-semillon sorbet on the side.

Gerard's cantaloupe soup gets a spark from the flavors of Thai basil and mint.

Foran especially likes the cool licorice flavor of basil with peaches; he pairs basil ice cream with his Peach Tarte Tatin on the menu at Arterra.

While his dessert presentations are complex, Foran likes to keep flavors simple when working with good summer fruits. He doesn't want to overwhelm the fruits' delicate, almost feminine flavors.

"If I get some really great white nectarine, I'll roast it, but I don't want to embellish it with too many other flavors," Foran said. "I like to let the components speak for themselves."

Even if he gets stuck with less-than-perfect fruit, such as mealy peaches, Foran doesn't despair. In summer, sugar, lemon juice and a few hours in the freezer can turn a disappointment into dessert.

Cantaloupe Soup With Strawberry Jelly and Sesame Tuile

8 servings

1 cantaloupe, seeded, peeled and diced

2 cups plus

- 2 tablespoons fresh orange juice
- 3 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- 2 tablespoons fresh ginger root, peeled and chopped
- 2 pounds fresh strawberries, washed, hulled and sliced, plus 2 cups more for garnish (divided use)
- 1 1/4 cups sugar (divided use)
- 5 sheets leaf gelatin, softened in cold water for 5 minutes (see note)
- 4 tablespoons olive oil
- 4 tablespoons lemon juice
- 8 Sesame Tuiles (see accompanying recipe)
- 8 sprigs fresh mint
- 8 sprigs Thai basil or regular basil

Place the cantaloupe, orange juice, lime juice and ginger in a food processor or blender and process until completely pureed. Slowly strain the puree through a cheesecloth into a nonreactive bowl. Reserve juice in the refrigerator.

Place 2 pounds strawberries and 1 cup sugar in a small saucepan and cook slowly until the strawberries are completely soft. Strain and discard berries, reserving the juice, being careful not to mash the berry pulp. You want the juice to be clear. Add the softened gelatin to the strawberry water and stir to dissolve. Pour the strawberry gelatin into a flat container, cover with plastic and refrigerate for 2 hours, or until it is set.

Meanwhile, mix the remaining 1/4 cup sugar with the olive oil and lemon juice in a small bowl to make a sweet lemon olive oil. Set aside.

To serve, dice strawberry jelly into small cubes and mix with remaining 2 cups sliced strawberries. In a deep bowl, create a ring of strawberry and strawberry jelly. Place a Sesame Tuile on top of berries. Crown with a sprig of mint, a sprig of Thai basil and a drizzle of sweet lemon oil. Carefully pour 3/4 cup of the cantaloupe soup around the fruit and gelatin. Repeat with the remaining bowls.

Note: Leaf gelatin, a kind used by many chefs, is available at specialty stores such as Great News! Cookware Store in Pacific Beach. Five sheets of leaf gelatin is equivalent to one package of powdered gelatin.

(From Thomas Gerard of the Ladeki Restaurant Group.)

Sesame Tuiles

Makes about 2 dozen cookies

- 1/2 cup flour
- 1 cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 1/2 sticks (3/4 cup) butter, softened
- 1/2 cup plus 1 tablespoon fresh orange juice
- 1 teaspoon orange zest
- 2 1/2 tablespoons sesame seeds

In a medium bowl, cream flour and sugar together with softened butter. Add orange juice, zest and sesame seeds, mixing well after each addition. Refrigerate dough for 2 hours to let it set.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Using a teaspoon, spoon lumps of dough the size of a walnut onto a cookie sheet covered with a baking mat (preferably Silpat). Dough lumps should be at least 3 inches apart. Flatten each lump of dough into a circle about 1/4 inch thick. Bake for 5 to 7 minutes, until brown. Remove from the oven and let tuiles cool completely before handling.

Stored in an airtight container, tuiles will keep for 3 or 4 days.

(From Thomas Gerard of the Ladeki Restaurant Group.)

Creme Frache Panna Cotta With Balsamic Bing Cherries

- 6 servings
- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 1/2 teaspoons powdered gelatin, softened in 2 tablespoons cool water
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup crme frache (see note)

BALSAMIC BING CHERRIES

- 1 pound fresh Bing cherries, washed and pitted, plus a few extra for garnish
- Juice of 1/2 lemon
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup balsamic vinegar (8-or 10-year-old is best)

Mint Sorbet

(see accompanying recipe)

In a heavy, 2-quart saucepan, heat milk and cream over medium heat until hot and slightly frothy; then add softened gelatin and sugar. Stir until sugar and gelatin are dissolved. Remove from heat and set pan in a bowl of ice water until the mixture cools to 50 degrees. Stir in crme frache and then pour into six

4-ounce ramekins. Cover and refrigerate at least 4 hours and up to 3 days.

For Balsamic Bing Cherries: Place the cherries in a large saucepan with 1/2 cup water and the juice of 1/2 lemon. Add sugar and heat over medium-high heat for 10 to 12 minutes to release the liquid from the cherries. Remove from heat and strain cherries for 10 minutes, letting the liquid drain back into the saucepan. Put the stewed cherries into a bowl and set aside. Add balsamic vinegar to the cherry liquid and reduce over medium heat for 10 minutes, or until syrupy. Add reserved cherries to syrup and let cool to room temperature. Makes 1 1/2 cups.

To serve: Unmold each panna cotta onto a dessert plate. Garnish with 2 tablespoons of Balsamic Bing Cherries and little a scoop of mint sorbet.

Note: Creme frache, a thickened cream, is sold at specialty markets. To make it, whisk together 1/2 cup heavy cream and 1/2 cup sour cream. Let stand at room temperature until slightly thickened. Store in refrigerator.

(From Jack Fisher of Nine Ten in La Jolla.)

Mint Sorbet

3 cups

2 1/2 cups water

1 1/2 cups granulated sugar

4 cups fresh mint leaves

Combine water and sugar in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil and boil for one minute. Cool syrup completely in an ice bath or overnight in the refrigerator.

Place 5 cups of water in a large saucepan and bring to a boil. While waiting, prepare an ice bath by filling a large bowl with ice cubes and water. Blanch mint leaves by placing them in boiling water for 15 seconds. Remove them from the water and plunge them into the bowl of ice water.

Remove mint from the water and squeeze out any remaining water. Chop mint roughly, then place in a blender with 1 cup cooled syrup. Turn blender on low, gradually increasing speed to the highest setting. Blend for 1 minute, then add remaining syrup. Strain with a fine mesh strainer.

Freeze in an ice cream machine according to the manufacturer's directions.

(From Jack Fisher of Nine-Ten in La Jolla.)

Apricot Galette With Fig Caramel

6 servings

1 vanilla bean

¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons granulated sugar

8 ounces prepared frozen puff pastry, thawed

6 large ripe apricots, washed, halved and seeded

Fig Caramel (see accompanying recipe)

Cut vanilla bean in half lengthwise and scrape out seeds. Make a quick vanilla sugar by rubbing the vanilla seeds and bean together with the sugar until the black specks are distributed through the sugar. Remove the pod and set aside.

On a lightly floured surface, roll thawed puff pastry out to 1/8-inch thickness. Cut the dough into six 5-by-3-inch rectangles. Place rectangles on a parchment-lined cookie sheet. Prick each one four times with a fork.

Lay apricot halves cut side down on cutting board and, using a sharp knife, slice each horizontally into 10 or 11 slices. Leaving a ¼ inch border, cover each piece of puff pastry with 20 or so apricot slices in rows that overlap slightly. Sprinkle 1 tablespoon of vanilla sugar over each galette.

Bake at 375 degrees for 20 minutes, or until puff pastry is golden and apricots are slightly charred. Hold at room temperature until needed. Drizzle with warm Fig Caramel before serving. James Foran serves the galettes with ginger ice cream.

(From James Foran of Arterra in Del Mar.)

Fig Caramel

Makes 1 cup

1 cup granulated sugar

1 tablespoon light corn syrup

¼ cup water

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

½ cup plus 2 tablespoons heavy cream

Pinch salt

8 fresh figs or dried figs, quartered

Place sugar, corn syrup and water in a stainless steel saucepan. Stir to combine and bring to a full boil. Remove any sugar crystals that stick to the side of the pot by brushing cold water along the sides. Reduce heat to medium and continue to boil until sugar is a medium-dark amber color.

Remove from the heat and quickly add butter. Whisk, being careful of hot steam, and then whisk in the cream. Add salt and figs, stirring to combine. Let cool to room temperature.

(From James Foran of Arterra in Del Mar.)

Berry Vanilla Custard Tart

Makes 1 (9-inch) tart

1 stick (½ cup) unsalted butter

½ vanilla bean

1-¼ cups sugar

3 tablespoons all-purpose flour

Pinch ground nutmeg

4 eggs

1 tablespoon lemon juice

Zest of 1 lemon

1 cup buttermilk, at room temperature

1 prebaked 9-inch sweet tart shell

3 pints strawberries (quartered), blackberries, raspberries or blueberries, or a combination

Powdered sugar

Whipped cream (optional)

Place the butter in a small saucepan and melt over low heat. Slice the vanilla bean lengthwise down the middle. Scrape the seeds into the saucepan and toss in the bean as well. Once the butter starts to brown lightly, remove from the heat and let cool.

Preheat oven to 300 degrees. In a mixing bowl or stand mixer, whisk together sugar, flour, nutmeg, eggs, lemon juice and zest. Add the buttermilk. Scrape the vanilla bean one more time into the melted butter, then throw the pod away. Whisk the butter into the sugar and egg mixture.

Pour custard into the prebaked tart shell. Place on a baking sheet and bake in the preheated oven. (Placing another baking sheet on the rack above the tart will help prevent the custard from forming a skin, but it will

take longer to cook.) Bake the tart for 90 minutes, rotating a half turn after 45 minutes. When tart is done, the center should still jiggle and the top will have browned slightly. Let cool and then refrigerate for 3 hours or overnight.

To serve, fill the top of the tart with berries and dust with powdered sugar. Garnish each slice with whipped cream, if you like.

(From Barbara Massey of Tartine in Coronado.)

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