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RESIDENT

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**Chefs Prepare Sophisticated
Dishes Using Figs**

By Sylvie Bigar



Even though the season for fresh figs has come to a close, this sensual fruit finds its way to our table either flown in from warmer climates, or in the form of a small dried pouch fragrant with Mediterranean essence. Savored as a sweetener in Middle Eastern cultures, the fig was an early symbol for peace and prosperity. Why not take your cues from our star chefs and serve them, either as dessert or to add a sweet note to a holiday dish?

BLT's chef Laurent Tourondel said figs remind him of his childhood in the South of France. "I happen to really love black mission figs, maybe because I remember getting them from the tree."

Tourondel said he prepares figs in his restaurant as an appetizer by wrapping them with prosciutto and grilling them lightly. Then, he adds fresh goat cheese and a few sprigs of mâche and drizzles a port wine reduction. The fig is warm and the prosciutto gets charred.

He also prepares a fig tart topped with crushed amaretto whipped cream. The figs are roasted with a touch of honey and lavender then mixed with fresh cassis and placed on the tart. "Figs are hard to work with; they are very fine and tasty, and you want to make sure you don't overpower their delicate taste. We also use dried figs in ice cream and often serve a wonderful fig marmalade from Italy with our cheese platter."

Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten also associates figs with his childhood and smiles when thinking about them. "I love figs. When I was growing up in Alsace, I ate dried figs during the holidays, but when I worked at L'Oasis in La Napoule, close to Cannes on the Riviera, I remember going to the market and finding the most wonderful figs, black in the summer and green in the fall."



At Jojo, chef Vongerichten serves black mission figs three ways on the same plate. "We take two fresh figs, we grill two and we pickle two more and prepare them with frisée, arugula and goat cheese," he said. "At Jean Georges, we work with figs in a foie gras brulée terrine and its fig compote. We cook the fruit down with a combination of spices and use it as a condiment. Then, there is a grilled sea bass wrapped with fig leaves. At

Vong, I steam a lamb loin slowly and then fry it, Peking duck-style, with a cinnamon crust and offer it with puréed eggplant and fig compote; it's Bombay meets Istanbul!" The chef also makes an almond frangipane cake with fresh figs and raspberry coulis. "I love the taste of raspberry with figs, these fruits have nothing in common but go very well together," he said.

Chef Todd English is so fond of the fruit that he named his restaurant Figs. "To me, the fig is the ultimate Mediterranean food and it represents the kind of cuisine that we love; I put it everywhere I can. Actually, we serve a fig and prosciutto pizza at Figs and a fig and prosciutto flatbread at our Olives restaurants." (The Manhattan location is in the W Hotel on Union Square). "I like fig pudding as well, but honestly, the best figs are the one you can pull from a tree, warmed by the sun; they are a very sexy fruit," he said. "When I worked at La Côte Basque, I lived in Queens and had a fig tree in my backyard. I used to pick them and eat them on the subway on my way to work."

Chef Gray Kunz, who just opened his new restaurant/lounge Grayz behind the Museum of Modern Art, remembers the holiday dried figs of his Swiss childhood. "We ate them for breakfast, I haven't had that for a while," he said. "I don't like the white or the green figs. I think that black mission figs are the best, with the strongest taste. Because of their small size, they are also easier to handle. I like my figs to be warmed so you cut the top, put a dab of butter, sprinkle sugar and a few drops of lemon juice and place them in the oven for five or six minutes, and then they can go with many different things. You can serve them with raspberry coulis or a port wine reduction for savory dishes." Kunz offers a sophisticated take on the fruit at Café Gray on Columbus Circle – hibiscus and port wine poached figs with marcona almonds and labne ice cream.