

FOOD

Rhubarb

Break out a bunch of rhubarb, and most people will automatically look for the nearest strawberries — the two go together like peanut butter and jelly. But there are plenty of ways to enjoy it on its own, in both sweet and savory preparations.

Technically a vegetable, most cooks consider rhubarb more of a fruit, opting to coax the sweet-tart characteristics out of the dark ruby stalks.

There are two basic varieties of rhubarb — hothouse and field-grown. The latter has a more acidic bite and a deeper color, though hothouse rhubarb has smoother flesh.

David Winsberg, owner of Happy Quail Farms in East Palo Alto, says that the season is off to a slow start because of some unseasonably wet and chilly weather. He brought about 30 pounds of rhubarb to the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market last Saturday (compared with about 300 pounds at the same time last year), but says the rest is soon to come. Prime season is mid-May, but Winsberg expects to harvest the stalks throughout the summer.

How to select: Stalks should be firm and crisp,

like celery. The darker the rhubarb, the sweeter it should be. Avoid limp, bruised stalks that are curled at the edges, and be sure to check the ends for decay or rotting.

How to prepare: If using the hothouse variety and the stalks seem stringy, shave the outer layer with a vegetable peeler. Rhubarb is at its best sliced and cooked down with a little sugar — either simmered on the stove or roasted; otherwise it can be overly sour.

Make sure to discard any outer leaves that may be attached to the stalks — whether raw or cooked, they are inedible and can be toxic due to oxalic acid.

How to store: Rhubarb can be refrigerated for up to a week in a plastic bag, but is best used within three days of purchase.

On menus: In San Francisco, Absinthe is featuring olive oil cake with candied rhubarb, lemon yogurt and chartreuse. In Oakland, look for cornmeal crepes with roasted rhubarb and buttermilk ice cream at Bay Wolf.

— Amanda Gold

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Rhubarb-Mascarpone Ice Cream Sandwiches

Makes 10 sandwiches

A little goes a long way with this rich, sweet-tart ice cream. This is an excellent make-ahead dish. You can make the ice cream and cookies the day before, or even assemble and freeze the entire sandwiches in advance.

For the ice cream:

- 1 cup heavy cream
- ½ cup whole milk
- ½ cup + 3 tablespoons sugar
- 1 cup mascarpone cheese
- 4 egg yolks
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Pinch kosher salt
- ½ pound rhubarb (about 3 stalks)

For the cookies:

- 1 cup + 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 cup rolled oats
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ¼ teaspoon cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ cup unsalted butter, room temperature
- 1 cup packed brown sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

For the ice cream: Heat the cream, milk, ¼ cup of the sugar and the mascarpone cheese in a pot over medium-low heat. As the mixture warms, whisk to incorporate the mascarpone; it's OK if you see a few small lumps. When the mixture just begins to simmer, remove from the heat.

In a separate bowl, whisk together the egg yolks, vanilla, ¼ cup sugar and a pinch of salt. Slowly whisk in the hot cream mixture, a little bit at a time.

Pour the custard back into the pot and return to medium-low heat. Stir constantly with a wooden spoon or spatula until it thickens enough to coat the back of the spoon. Strain through a fine mesh sieve and place the bowl over an ice water bath. When it reaches room temperature, cover and refrigerate at least four hours or overnight.

In the meantime, roast the rhubarb. Preheat the oven to 400°F. Cut rhubarb stalks in half crosswise and place on a baking sheet, with the flatter side up. Sprinkle evenly with the 3 tablespoons sugar, and roast for about 15 minutes, until lightly charred and softened, but still firm enough to hold their shape. Cool completely, then chop into small pieces.

Spin the cooled mascarpone mixture in an ice cream machine according to manufacturer's instructions. Remove the ice cream, and while it's still soft, fold in the roasted rhubarb. Freeze several hours or overnight, until ready to use.

For the cookies: Preheat the oven to 350°F. Combine the flour, oats, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon and salt; set aside.

In an electric mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, cream the butter and brown sugar until well combined and slightly fluffy. Add the eggs, one at a time, then the add vanilla extract. Add the dry ingredients and beat until just



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incorporated.

Using a 2-tablespoon measure, form the batter into balls and place 2 inches apart on parchment or silpat-lined cookie sheets. Using an offset spatula or the palm of your hand (you can wet it if the dough is too sticky), flatten the dough into circles, until they are about ½-inch thick. Bake for 10 to 11 minutes, until cooked though and golden around the edges. Set aside until completely cool.

To assemble the sandwiches: Pair each cookie with

a like-sized partner. Scoop a scant ¼ cup of the ice cream and place between the flat sides of the two cookies, press together, and place in a shallow dish. (You will have some ice cream left over.) Serve the sandwiches immediately or freeze until ready to eat.

Per serving: 460 calories, 7 g protein, 49 g carbohydrate, 27 g fat (15 g saturated), 178 mg cholesterol, 187 mg sodium, 2 g fiber.

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