

Strawberries

Strawberries may be California's iconic spring fruit, but my relationship with them is personal. My father-in-law was a produce broker for many years, and those berries were one of his main crops. My mother-in-law didn't care for the berries much herself, but still had them all over her house — on highball glasses, embroidered on tablecloths and 3-D felt ones hanging from a white wicker purse.

If my father-in-law were still in the business, he might be a little anxious this year. With the heavy spring rains and even hail, some of the fruit has been damaged, say the folks at Blue Moon Organics near Aptos. Still, they'll have their Chandler and Albion varieties to supply at Bi-Rite and Rainbow Grocery in San Francisco, Farmer Joe's in Oakland, and Whole Foods in Mill Valley and San Rafael.

Jim Cochran of Swanton Berry Farm says that while his fields have been wet, this isn't atypical. He expects to have his Chandlers at retail outlets — Whole Foods, Rainbow Grocery and Monterey

Market — within the next two to three weeks, while his stand at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market and his farm stand on Highway 1 in Davenport are already humming. Peak season for this flavorful but somewhat finicky variety is end of May through mid-June, with supplies continuing until October. Other varieties such as Seascape will have a steady supply through spring and summer.

How to store: As Jane Tunks reported in Seasonal Cook last year, the best way to store berries is to arrange them, unwashed, in a single layer in a paper towel-lined plastic container. Cover them and store in the refrigerator up to a week. Wash just before using.

On menus: You won't have to look far to find various versions of strawberry shortcake, crisp or cobbler all over the Bay Area. Spruce in San Francisco offers something novel — hot and cold foie gras with a strawberry terrine, strawberry consommé.

— Miriam Morgan

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Strawberry Meringue Cake

Serves 12 to 14

This taste-of-spring cake, courtesy of Morgan family matriarch Tante Irene, is a take on a Pavlova. The meringue can be baked the evening before serving, but be sure the weather is dry when you make this cake — if it's rainy the meringue will get sticky and weep.

8 large egg whites
1½ cups sugar
1 tablespoon distilled white vinegar
1 tablespoon vanilla extract
3 baskets strawberries (about 10 ounces each)
Granulated sugar, to taste
1 pint whipping cream

Instructions: In the mixer bowl of a stand mixer, beat egg whites until foamy. Gradually add the 1½ cups sugar, the vinegar and the vanilla. Continue beating until egg whites are stiff. (You can also do this with a hand-held mixer, but it will take longer.)

Preheat the oven to 250°. Scrape the egg white mixture into an ungreased 9- or 10-inch springform pan. Gently press the mixture down with a rubber spatula to minimize potential air pockets from forming. Bake 1 to 2 hours, until top is lightly browned. Turn oven off and leave meringue in the oven several hours or overnight to dry out.

Remove meringue from oven. Run a dinner knife around the edge of the meringue to loosen it from the sides of the pan, but do not remove the ring. Use the same knife to lift off the browned top of the meringue — it will come off in pieces of various sizes. Put the pieces, browned side up, in a single layer on a plate or baking sheet; set aside.

Several hours before serving, assemble the cake. Slice or cut the strawberries about ¼-inch thick. Place in a bowl, and sprinkle very lightly with sugar to sweeten; the amount will depend on the sweetness of the berries. Set aside.

Whip cream in the stand mixer or with hand-held beaters. Add sugar to taste.

Spread a third of the whipped cream over the meringue. Top with half the berries, leaving most of the accumulated berry juices in the bowl. Top with another third of

the whipped cream, then more berries, saving some to serve over the cake slices, if desired. End with a layer of whipped cream. Arrange the browned pieces of meringue on top, trying to cover most of the whipped cream. The pieces will not completely cover it all, which is fine.

Tent the cake with foil (use toothpicks to keep the foil from touching the cake) and refrigerate several hours, until ready to serve. Refrigerate any leftover strawberries and their juices to serve with the cake.

Craig Lee / Special to The Chronicle; styled by Katie Popoff

When ready to serve, remove the cake from the refrigerator and place on a cake plate. Carefully remove and lift off the ring from the springform pan. Cut into thin wedges to serve, and drizzle each piece with some of the strawberry juices and top with any remaining strawberries.

Per serving: 231 calories, 3 g protein, 27 g carbohydrate, 13 g fat (8 g saturated), 47 mg cholesterol, 45 mg sodium, 1 g fiber.

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