

PEACHES

Ever since it opened, we've been enjoying the delicious peaches and nectarines, plums and pluots that we get at the Farmers Market. And I have to say that the quality of the summer fruit at the supermarkets has also improved considerably in the past few years. A couple of Saturdays ago I was a judge at the peach bake-off at the Farmers Market, and enjoyed sampling some delicious peach desserts, including a fresh peach pie with a little grated orange peel in it—simply delicious.

So here are a few ideas for some quick peach desserts—they'd work fine with nectarines as well, but the peaches that are available are freestone, which makes slicing them much easier. You can peel the peaches if you like, but I don't bother.

Here's a baked peaches with almonds that's real easy. Preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Using a sharp paring knife, cut four ripe but firm unpeeled peaches in half, and remove and discard the pits. Put the peach halves cut side down in one layer in a gratin dish. In a large glass measuring cup, dissolve 1 ½ tablespoons of brown sugar in two cups of water. Add ¼ cup of maple syrup. Pour the mixture over the peaches, dot the peaches with a tablespoon of sweet butter, cut into little pieces, and sprinkle about ½ cup of sliced almonds over the top.

Put the gratin dish on a cookie tray, and put the cookie tray in the preheated oven. Bake for about 15 minutes, then take the tray out and turn the peaches over, so that the skin side is down. Return the tray to the oven and bake for another 15 minutes or so. The sauce should be very syrupy by now. Take the tray out of the oven, turn the peaches over very carefully so they are skin side up again, and let them cool to room temperature. Serve two peach halves per person with some of the syrup. For extra elegance, top the gratin with some sour cream or some really good vanilla ice cream.

Or try this peach custard. Preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Slice up about 1 ½ to 2 cups of peach slices—I usually also cut the slices in half crosswise. Mix ¼ cup of sugar together with 1 tablespoon of cornstarch in a mixing bowl. Add 1 ½ teaspoon of vanilla extract and 2 eggs and whisk it all together for about 45 seconds. Whisk in 1 ½ cups of milk.

Spread the peach slices evenly in a 4-6 cup gratin dish. Pour the egg mixture over the peaches, and place the dish on a cookie sheet. Bake the gratin in the 350 degree oven for about 40 minutes, until the custard is just set. Let it cool to room temperature—it will firm up a bit as it cools. Sprinkle about 1 teaspoon powdered sugar on top of the cool gratin and serve at room temperature. I made this dish using the sugar substitute Splenda and it came out fine.

If you have some pound cake, here's a quick peach dessert. Preheat your broiler, putting the oven shelf in the middle of the oven. Cut a slice of pound cake for each person. Spread some unsalted butter on the slice. Arrange peach slices on the slice of pound cake, from the outside towards the center, so it looks like the petals of a flower. Plum slices are also good added in with the peach slices. Put a few pieces of sliced banana in the center of each peach fruit flower, sprinkle a teaspoon of sugar over the fruit and dot with some more unsalted butter. Put the slices on a cookie sheet and pop them under the broiler. Broil for about 10 minutes—they won't cook too fast as you've put the shelf in the middle of the oven. Serve right out of the oven—the fruit should be barely cooked and the sugar lightly caramelized on top.

And if all you have is frozen fruit, try this. In a glass baking dish, mix together one package of frozen peaches with one package of frozen blueberries. Sweeten with a couple of tablespoons of apricot jam and add a tablespoon or so of brandy or rum. Mix it all together, and take half a loaf of stale pound cake. Crumble the stale pound cake over the fruit mixture and dot the top with unsalted butter. Bake in a 350 oven for half an hour or so until the top has browned and the fruit is bubbly. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.