

PEACHES AND PLUMS

One of the nicer perks of being a food writer is that sometimes you get invited to judge food competitions. Last Saturday I enjoyed judging the peach bake-off at the Sutter Creek Farmers' Market. There were all sorts of delicious entries, from a peach-marsala cake to an old fashioned chess pie with peaches, but my favorite was a traditional lattice-crust peach pie with a nice crust and a delicious filling.

One of the great things about this time of year is the abundance of stone fruits, like peaches, nectarines, cherries, plums and apricots. Amador county peaches just haven't been the same since Ken Bailey cut down his peach orchard on Charleston Rd. to put in grapes, but we still can find some pretty good peaches and nectarines at the market. And just the other week the vendor had some real Santa Rosa plums, which I hadn't seen in a few years.

But back to peaches. For a quick and easy dessert, slice up some ripe peaches or nectarines. You don't even need to peel the peaches, just wipe them off with a damp paper towel. Mix the sliced fruit with a couple of spoonfuls of apricot jam and a dash of brandy or rum, and use that as a topping for the Basque cake sold by Andrae's Bakery at their bakery or at our local farmers' markets. Or you can use slices of fresh plum.

And if you have about half an untopped cake leftover, here's another easy dessert. Slice up three or four peaches or nectarines. Put them in a covered glass baking dish, along with an equal amount of fresh blueberries, which you can also get at the farmers' market. Sweeten the mixture with some apricot jam and add a slug of brandy, rum, or orange liqueur. Take some leftover Basque cake or pound cake and crumble the cake between your palms, sprinkling the crumbs over the fruit. You want a good, reasonably thick topping.

Then dot the topping with some dabs of unsalted butter. My favorite butter is the Italian unsalted butter, made from the same cream that is used to make Reggiano-Parmesan cheese, which I also get at Andrae's. Then bake the dish, uncovered, in a pre-heated 350 degree oven for about 30 minutes or so, until the top is golden and the filling is hot and bubbling. I like to serve this garnished with either whipped cream, vanilla yogurt or even vanilla ice cream.

These days, not only do you get plums, but you also get pluots or apriums, which are plum/apricot crosses. This next dessert, a simple plum cobbler, can be made with any of those, or even a mixture. Quarter and remove the pit from about seven or eight ripe plums. Preheat your oven to 400 degrees. In the bowl of a food processor, place 1/3 cup old fashioned rolled oats, (you can get those at the supermarket), 1/3 cup all-purpose flour, 1/3 cup sugar, 1/3 cup pecan halves, 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon, 3 tablespoons of unsalted butter and 1 tablespoon cooking oil, like canola. Process for about 15 to 20 seconds, until the mixture is crumbly.

Put your pitted and quartered plums in a six cup gratin dish. I like to sprinkle about 1/3 cup sliced fresh or dried apricots around the plums as well. Then sprinkle the crumbly topping over the fruit and bake in the 400 degree oven for about 40 minutes, until done. This is nice garnished with a little sour cream or crème fraiche.

By the way, on Sunday, August 26, don't miss the Historic Food, Wine and Spirits Tour, put on by the Farms of Amador and the Farmers' Market. You'll tour ghost wineries, historic ranches, old gold mines and even older olive groves, with dinner at a winery afterwards. You can get tickets at any of the Amador Farmers' Markets, Saturday in Sutter Creek, Monday in Lone, and Wednesday in Pine Grove. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.