

PEARS

Now that autumn is officially here, I'm starting to see pears for sale at our Farmers Markets. There are several varieties of pears available nowadays, such as the Bartlett, Anjou, Bosc, Comice and even the tiny Seckel. The Bartlett is the most common eating pear, from old English stock, sweet, juicy, bell-shaped and yellow when ripe. Anjou is the mildest pear, green with very white flesh. Bosc is tapered, russet in color, good for eating but even better for cooking.

Comice is rounded in shape, sweet and also excellent for cooking as like the Bosc, it is rather firm of flesh. The Seckel, which you usually only see at the Farmers Markets, is russet, rounded and only two inches long, with a spicy aromatic flavor, excellent for eating but even better for canning and pickling. Pears can be ripened by keeping them in a paper bag until they're ready to eat.

I like to eat pears out of hand, or cored and sliced. Chunks of pear are excellent in a salad, along with some walnuts and a blue-cheese vinaigrette. Slices of Brie or Camembert cheese are fantastic served on slices of fresh pear. And poached pears are one of my favorite desserts. Here are a couple of versions.

Take a piece of fresh ginger about the size of a walnut and peel it. Slice the ginger into thin slices and put it in a saucepan, along with 2 ½ cups of white wine, more or less—I like a dry Chenin Blanc or a spicy Gewurtztraminer for this, half a cup of sugar, and several strips of lemon peel. Bring this to a boil over medium heat. While the wine is heating, peel four firm Anjou or Bosc pears, but leave the stem on, and core the pears from the bottom with a melon-baller. Put the pears into the wine mixture and simmer, partially covered, for about 20 minutes or so, until tender. (It always takes longer to cook the pears than you think, but don't let them cook into mush.) Turn the pears occasionally so they cook evenly.

Take out the cooked pears and stand each in a little bowl. Boil the syrup down until it's reduced by about half, you want it moderately thick, add more sugar if needed, and spoon some of the syrup over each pear. I like to sprinkle the pears with some chopped candied ginger, and serve them with some thin crispy cookies. Shaving some chocolate over the pears is also delicious.

The more traditional way of poaching pears is in red wine, and this spicy version is one of my favorites. Make your wine syrup by mixing 2 cups of a fruity dry red wine, like a Petit Sirah or a fruity Zinfandel with one cup of water, ½ cup sugar, a bay leaf, a stick of cinnamon, half a dozen each whole cloves and allspice berries, and a half teaspoon of whole peppercorns. I also like to add several slices of orange peel.

Peel and core your pears like you did for the previous recipe, add them and simmer, partially covered, until the pears are tender when pierced with a knife, turning the pears in the sauce from time to time. Take the pears out of the sauce and boil it down until reduced by half. Return the pears to the pot and let them steep in the sauce until ready to serve. These are excellent at room temperature or even cold, and I like to garnish each serving with a sprig of mint and serve them with some thin chocolate cookies.

Pears can also be roasted. Jacques Pepin has a wonderful recipe that involves preheating your oven to 425 degrees, melting a couple of tablespoons of unsalted butter in a small gratin dish, and then stirring in a tablespoon of lemon juice into the melted butter. You prepare four pears the same way as for poaching, then roll the peeled and cored pears in the melted butter mixture, then sprinkle a tablespoon of sugar over each pear. Stand the pears upright in the gratin dish and then bake them in the 425 degree oven for about an hour and a quarter, basting them with their own juices about every 20 minutes or so, until they are nicely browned and tender when pierced with the point of a knife and the juices are a rich brown caramel color. If the juices start to get too dark, add 3 or 4 tablespoons of water.

When the pears are tender, take them out of the oven, stir 3 tablespoons of Port or Madeira into the juices, let the pears cool to room temperature, and serve them with some of the sauce spooned over and around them. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.