

STRAWBERRIES

It's strawberry time again! The stand on Highway 16 and Sunrise, the one on Kettleman at Highway 99, and the ones on Highway 88 on the road to Stockton are open for business. While you've been able to get strawberries in the supermarket for some weeks now, they're Driscolls from Watsonville—a variety primarily known for its shipping ability, rather than its flavor—and picked very green.

When I was a kid, my mom bought Shastas or Tiogas from a Japanese lady off of a flatbed truck off Highway 1 in Moss Landing. Those varieties were large, fragrant and oh so sweet and strawberry tasting. However she was replaced by a corporation who wanted sturdy fruit that would ship well. The fields of Shastas and Tiogas were replaced by a Japanese variety called Aiko, which looked like absolutely gorgeous but tasted like a piece of wax fruit. Then came the Driscoll, which was marginally better, but still left a lot to be desired. The berries I'm getting now in the flatlands are Chandlers, an excellent eating variety, and as they're allowed to ripen on the plant, they are bursting with flavor.

They're excellent eaten sliced in cream. They are delightful sliced with a little chilled champagne poured over them. They are charming sliced with a little brown sugar and sour cream. They are delicious sliced with a few drops of an aged balsamic vinegar on them. They are superb, just eaten out of hand, berry by berry. Here are a few more ideas on how to serve strawberries.

Put 3 cups of washed and hulled strawberries, cut into slices vertically, into a large glass bowl. Add 1 cup of orange juice, 1 cup of a good drinkable white wine, and ½ cup of sweet vermouth. Mix it all together, cover with plastic wrap and chill. Serve garnished with some fresh mint leaves and accompanied by your favorite cookies.

Take 3 cups of washed and hulled strawberries. Cut up enough of the slightly unripe, overripe and bruised berries to make about ¾ cup. Put them into a food processor with 3 tablespoons of strawberry jam and 2 tablespoons of dark rum, and process until smooth. Spoon the sauce over the rest of the berries and serve. The berries are good just as they are, or spooned over slices of pound or angel food cake or vanilla ice cream. Last weekend I spooned the strawberries in strawberry jam sauce over the Basque cake from Andrae's bakery and served it to my inlaws—who were very happy indeed!

This next one is a little weird, but tasty. Combine equal parts of fresh pineapple chunks and strawberry halves in a mixing bowl. Pour over 1/3 cup of real maple syrup mixed with two tablespoons of fresh lemon juice. Cover and chill for several hours or even overnight. Serve in deep bowls, accompanied by some good cookies.

Or try this. In your food processor, combine three over-ripe bananas, one 15-ounce container of ricotta cheese, one tablespoon lemon juice and one tablespoon honey and process until smooth and creamy. On each dessert plate, spoon a large dollop of the ricotta/banana mixture and cover it with washed, hulled and quartered strawberries. To be even fancier, garnish the dish with thin slices of ripe melon. Garnished with a sprig of fresh mint, you have a tasty and healthful dessert.

And of course there is strawberry shortcake. I've not included a recipe, as everyone's is the best. I personally prefer using real short cake rather than sponge cake, (which you can make easily enough from the instructions on the back of a Bisquick box.) And never mind the whipped cream in the shaving cream can--just make real whipped cream with some sugar and vanilla, (the fancy name for this is *crème chantilly*)—your kids will thank you for it. This makes a strawberry shortcake that your family and friends will be talking about long after the summer's over.