

STRAWBERRY SHORTCAKE

The Fourth of July is upon us in a few days, and soon it will be time to fire up the grill and get those hot dogs and hamburgers going. Fourth of July always means a picnic to me, even if it's only in my own back yard. Many parks have built-in grills or will let you take your own hibachi, but check first with the management regarding lighting a barbecue fire at this time of year.

On this day I don't want anything too fancy and elaborate—hot dogs and hamburgers, and some potato or macaroni salad work just fine. I bring along a selection of olives and pickles, and for dessert, it's strawberry shortcake. Everyone has his or her favorite version of strawberry shortcake, but here's one that works for me.

First of all, I don't like those little package sponge cakes that are sometimes used. To begin with, it's not even a "shortcake". The name "shortcake" derives from being made "short", a word dating back to 15th century cooking circles, which basically means being made crisp from the use of fat. Think in terms of Scottish shortbread, a crisp cookie-like pastry made that way by the liberal use of butter.

In America, shortcake means a rich pastry enclosing fruits, and it became very popular in the mid-1800s and continues so to the present day. And while there are many delicious desserts that can be made with strawberries and other kinds of cake, like pound cake, angel food cake, or even sponge cake, the traditional shortcake is usually made with a sweetened biscuit pastry, plenty of sliced strawberries, and a generous dollop of whipped cream.

I went searching for strawberry shortcake recipes the other day, and I discovered ginger-orange strawberry shortcake, chocolate strawberry shortcake, mint strawberry shortcake, strawberry shortcake with white chocolate mousse, and in the June issue of *Bon Appetit*, strawberry shortcake with brown sugar biscuits, lemon peel, white chocolate cream, and dried lavender. I'll tell you right now, anyone who puts lavender in my strawberry shortcake is asking for a punch in the nose.

For strawberry shortcake, sprinkle about 1/3 cup of sugar over a quart of strawberries that have been rinsed, hulled and sliced. Let the berries sit for about an hour. Sometimes I like to just very lightly mash some of the berries with a fork. Make a rich biscuit dough with flour, baking powder, sugar, salt, butter and cream. Check a good cookbook for the proportions. Beat 1 ½ cups of heavy cream with a couple of tablespoons of confectioners sugar and a half-teaspoon of vanilla. Split the biscuits with a fork and cover one half with strawberries and their juice. Place the other half of the biscuit over the strawberries, cover with more berries and top with whipped cream.

You can try using some of the ready-made pop and fresh biscuit dough in the tube from the supermarket, but you may find them a little salty and heavy. Try sprinkling the rounds with a little sugar before baking. Wishing you all a Happy Fourth of July, this is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.