

FOOD

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Fresh summer eating

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL
FOR THE MESSENGER

"Do they get pineapples in Kentucky?" It was a Saturday afternoon in early September, still summer but just barely, and I didn't yet need a sweater while my grandfather and I sat on our little front porch in Michigan. As he sat there, puffing on a plastic-tipped White Owl cigar, he told me that he was going to Kentucky for a while to visit his sister and several of my aunts and uncles who lived there.

I was eight years old and I was devastated. My grandfather McGregor was my best friend. He had lived with us since I was about two years old and I did not remember a time when he wasn't with our family; until that day I had never even considered that he could go anywhere without me. We were buddies, and the idea of him leaving me to go see these other people was almost unbearable.

To top it all off, a few months earlier I had gotten a new baby brother and my reign as "baby of the family" had come to an end. It was terrible.

Seeing the anxiety of his impending absence written across my face, my grandfather tried to switch the focus toward his return by asking what I wanted him to bring me. We discussed a few options, including a monkey, until finally we reached an agreement: a pineapple it would be.

Growing up, we never had much in the way of store bought fruit or vegetables, until the peach trees froze up and then my folks bought store canned peaches if they couldn't get any fresh ones to can themselves. A pineapple was a dream of mythic proportions.

So were instant potatoes. I always considered my neighbor, Donna, to be very fortunate because her mother bought instant potatoes all the time. We only got them on Fridays when Mom let us each buy a Banquet Turkey T.V. Dinner to eat while we watched the Brady Bunch. I waited all week long for Friday nights.

Of course, in the years since I have learned that although you can get a pineapple in Kentucky, they don't actually grow here (nor do monkeys). But a lot of other things do, and many of them are just about at their peak right now. (I still can't help feeling that instant potatoes are somehow special, though.)

Some folks can easily make fruit and vegetables the main part of their diet, but I am not one of them. In the summer, however, when the produce is burstingly fresh, I do occasionally serve up a supper consisting of nothing more than freshly prepared produce.

I chose two fresh tarts — sans pineapple, monkeys or instant mashed potatoes — showcasing what is available from our own yards or from the farmer's market this time of year. One is savory, the other sweet.

Fresh Tomato Tart

Here is a savory French-ish tart highlighting that most popular of garden gems, the tomato. This recipe is an adaptation of the tomato onion tart in Joanne Weir's 1997 cookbook, *Summer*. Her version is a bit more complicated, as it includes directions for making puff pastry. I wanted a dish that could be put together even on a weeknight, so I purchased frozen puff pastry, and changed a few ingredients to highlight the fresh tomato taste a little more. It has a fancy European bistro look that is perfect for serving to company, but simple enough to make anytime.

When I make this dish in the springtime, I like to use fresh wild garlic clipped from the yard (before my husband, Chuck, mows it down). Vary the herbs to suit your own taste, but fresh is best. In lieu of fresh herbs, a few gratings of lemon rind or chopped green onion add a



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A fresh fruit tart is the perfect pick for a fancy summer feast.



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Fresh tomato tart garnish with oregano sprigs.

refreshing twist.
1 sheet frozen puff pastry (I used Pepperidge farm)
1/2 lb fresh tomatoes, (about 3 medium) all red or a variety of colors
Salt, to taste
6 ounces Gruyere or Swiss cheese
1 small red or white onion
1 tablespoon fresh herbs
A few ribbons of fresh Parmesan

Preheat oven to 400. Thaw the pastry about 40 minutes, just until it can be handled without breaking. It is important to keep it cold until baking so that it will fully puff. Meantime, slice the tomatoes into 1/4-inch rounds and lightly salt. Grate or thinly slice the cheese. Slice the onion paper thin; you may not want to use all of it.

Lay the pastry onto a baking sheet or pizza pan. Layer the cheese onto the pastry, leaving about an inch around the edges. Arrange the tomato slices over the cheese, overlapping them slightly. Separate the onion into rings and layer as much of them as you'd like over the tomatoes.

Fold the edges of the pastry over to create a bit of a rim to keep the tomato juices from running. Don't

worry about being too tidy, this is a rustic dish and puff pastry does not take well to too much handling.

Bake for about 30 minutes or until the pastry is crisp, golden and puffed. Sprinkle with Parmesan and fresh herbs. Serve immediately, as cold puff pastry tends to get mushy. Makes 4-6 servings.

Fresh Fruit Tart with Pastry Cream Filling

This is a light summery dessert with a luscious shortbread crust, creamy filling and fresh fruit topping. It takes a bit of doing, but a much simpler version can be made by simply replacing the pastry cream with a couple of containers of vanilla yogurt. You can also make it without added sugar by using sugar substitute and a sugar-free fruit spread for the glaze. I haven't found a way to make it without butter, but it's worth it. The pastry cream is better made a day ahead.

To Prepare The Shortbread Crust:

This is exactly the same thing as one of my favorite cookies, Scottish shortbread, and every time I make it I'm tempted to stop with just the crust and eat it as is. This makes enough crust for a 9 or 10" springform pan or a deep-dish pie plate.

1/3 cup sugar or sugar substitute
1 1/2 cups all purpose flour
1/4 teaspoon salt
3/4 cup (1 1/2 sticks) cold butter (not margarine)

Blend the sugar, flour and salt in a medium mixing bowl. Cut the cold butter into small cubes and work into the flour mixture with a pastry cutter or give it a few pulses in a food processor. When it looks like the proverbial "peas", dump it into the the tart pan and press from the center outward, and an inch or so up the side. Running your thumb around the edge to smooth it will give a nice finish to the crust. Don't worry if the crust looks dry and powdery, the butter will melt it all together as it bakes.

Chill it in the freezer for about 15 minutes. Meantime, preheat the oven

to 425.

After chilling, place the tart pan on a baking sheet and bake until golden, about 15 minutes. Cool thoroughly before filling.

To Prepare The Vanilla Pastry Cream:

Variations of this filling are a prerequisite in every bakery or doughnut shop in the world. Take out the cornstarch and flour and you have *crème Anglaise*. Add gelatin and you have Bavarian cream. Or as mentioned above, skip the whole thing and use vanilla yogurt. It will not taste quite the same, although it will be much lower in calories and cholesterol.

A wire mesh sieve is handy to be certain of a silky smooth result, but not absolutely necessary. It does require constant stirring, and if you are concerned about overcooking, use a double boiler.

1/4 cup sugar or sugar substitute
2 tablespoons flour
2 tablespoons cornstarch
3 egg yolks, lightly beaten
1 1/2 cups heavy cream, divided
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

In a medium mixing bowl whisk together the sugar, flour, cornstarch and egg yolks; set aside. Pour 1 cup of the heavy cream into a small saucepan or top of a double boiler. Heat until it is hot and steamy; do not let it boil. Add 3 or 4 tablespoons of the hot cream to the sugar-egg yolk mixture, whisking constantly. Continue to whisk and carefully add the rest of the hot cream, then pour the whole thing back into the saucepan.

Without letting it boil, heat the mixture and stir constantly, until it is thickened. Remove from the heat and stir in the vanilla extract. For a silky smooth result, immediately strain through a wire mesh sieve into a bowl. Press plastic wrap onto the surface to keep a skin from forming on it. Chill it thoroughly; at this point you can leave it for or up to a day.

To finish the cream, lightly whip the remaining 1/2 cup of heavy cream and fold into the custard.

For The Fresh Fruit Topping:

Of course, you can use whatever fruit you like. I chose plums, apricots and blackberries simply because that was what I had on hand, and decided to make the tart resemble one of those lovely bronze sunflowers. If you use different fruit, adjust the amounts accordingly.

5 plums, halved, pitted and sliced into thin wedges
1 pint blackberries
2 apricots, pitted and sliced into thin wedges
1/2 cup apple jelly or apricot jam

Carefully spread the chilled pastry cream (or yogurt) to the edge of the crust. This is the "glue" that will hold the fruit in place. Starting at the outermost edge, lay the plum wedges around the outside of the crust, forming a wide ring. Place apricot wedges upright around the inside of the plum ring. Fill the center with the blackberries. Heat the apple jelly in a small saucepan or in the microwave until it spreads easily; brush onto the fruit, coating well.

Chill thoroughly before serving. Serves 8-10.