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Preserved Unripe Figs

by MONIQUE TRUONG • OCT. 6, 2011



Damijan Saccio Preserved unripe figs with butter, over bread.

In this new column, Monique Truong, author of “The Book of Salt” and “Bitter in the Mouth,” shares food stories and recipes from her kitchen table.

A fig tree grows in our Brooklyn backyard. My husband planted it five years ago from a branch given to us at Caputo’s Fine Foods, our local family-owned purveyor of all things Italian and delicious to eat. We had dropped by the sliver of a shop — anywhere else in the United States you would call it a hallway — for the house-made mozzarella, and there on the counter was an unexpected tumble of fresh figs, which they were giving away for free. “Go ahead, take a couple,” said Frank, the more talkative of the two Caputo brothers. (Say it aloud in your best Brooklyn accent and imagine the sound of angel’s trumpets that accompany such urban blessings.)

These yellow-green figs were locally sourced, as in they’d been picked from a tree in the shop’s backyard. My husband, Damijan, was so full of questions that Frank took him out back for a site

visit. Damijan returned with a thin branch about the length of my arm. Frank's instructions were simple and sounded a lot like magical thinking: Dig a deep hole, insert branch and cover with mulch. Come spring, *ecco*, a fig tree!

Our tree — we think it is a kalamata — is now tall enough to reach the windows of our neighbors on the second floor.

On the cusp of October is when the second and final crop of figs tends to ripen. I can hear them doing so before I ever see proof of it. Or rather, I can hear the chirping birds that congregate in the branches to peck at them, leaving their seeded, pink hearts exposed to the elements. There are years when the last figs of the season never ripen. They form too late in the summer. There are not enough days of sunshine. An early frost descends, and the entire crop is lost.

This year I wanted to make sure that we had a fighting chance of enjoying another harvest. Figs are fussy, though. They do not continue to ripen after they are picked. Either I get them soft and oozing their juices right before the birds do, or I settle for a bowlful of hard, tasteless figs. Turning to the most comprehensive cookbook available — a k a the Internet — I found a trove of recipes for unripe figs attributed to Greek, Turkish and Lebanese culinary traditions. They were all variations on a theme: unripe figs, simmered until tender, and preserved in a sugar syrup fragrant with lemon peels and often a spice like cloves. The recipes sounded like instances of magical thinking too, or perhaps instructions of sheer will. I was willing to try, as the promise was great: that with heat and a few simple ingredients, I too could transform these green orbs, somewhere between vegetable and rock, into a delicate fruit that would get us through the winter, when fresh figs from our backyard would sound even more like myth.

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Note: I took the liberty of cutting down the sugar in the basic recipe by half, so if you would like to taste the preserve as it is classically prepared, you can increase the amount accordingly. The ratio that I saw most often is equal parts sugar and water. My version is less of a confection, but it is still plenty sweet. The preserved figs are great spooned onto a piece of buttered bread or into a bowl of Greek yogurt for breakfast. Coupled with a goat cheese or a mild blue, like gorgonzola dolce, these figs would make a memorable dessert.

- 1 to 1 ½ pounds of unripe figs (those that are almost full size are best but smaller ones are fine too)
- 2 ½ cups of white sugar
- 5 cups of water
- 6 whole cloves
- 1 organic lemon, peel removed in six longish strips

2 wide-mouth canning jars (1 pint each), sterilized

1. Wear plastic gloves when picking and working with unripe figs as they ooze a milky white liquid from their stems that can irritate your skin. Wash the figs well. Cut off their stem along with a bit of the fruit from that end and make a slit at the bottom of the figs.
2. Place figs in a pot and cover with water. Bring to a boil. Cover pot with a lid and continue boiling for 15 minutes.
3. Using a slotted spoon, lift the figs out of the water and place in a bowl. Carefully pour out the hot water. Give the pot a quick rinse.
4. Return the figs to the pot and repeat Steps 2 and 3 three more times.
5. The figs should now be soft but still retain their shape. (You may need to boil them a little less or a little more depending on how unripe the figs are.)
6. Place figs back in the pot. Add the 5 cups of water, sugar, the juice of half the lemon (about 2 tablespoons), 4 strips of lemon peel and cloves. Bring to a boil and continue cooking, partially covering the pot with a lid, until the liquid becomes slightly syrupy and the figs begin to glisten. (If you use equal parts sugar and water, then this will happen sooner.) If there are figs that are becoming too soft and look as if they might lose their shape but the liquid has not reached the desired consistency, remove those figs with a slotted spoon and place in a clean bowl.
7. Cool the figs in their syrup.
8. Fill the two jars with figs and syrup, including the peels and cloves. Before sealing, add a strip of lemon peel (the two pieces that were not cooked with the syrup) at the top of each jar. Seal and refrigerate.
9. The figs are ready to eat after a week.

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