

Pucker Up For Sour Cherries



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by Domenica Marchetti

[NPR.org](#), June 17, 2009 · While most people prefer sweet red Bing cherries or blush Rainiers in summer, it is my firm opinion that the real treasure is the sour cherry. Like much in life that is desirable, sour cherries are hard to come by, hard to keep and worth seeking out.

Unlike their more common sweet cousins, sour cherries, also known as tart cherries or pie cherries, are a little too pucker-inducing for most people to enjoy eating raw (though I personally adore them). Their season is brief — a few short weeks at the end of June and beginning of July — and the fruit itself is highly perishable. But if you can get your hands on them, they make excellent pies and preserves and pair well with anything from vanilla ice cream to roast duck.

My first encounter with sour cherries was many years ago in Italy and involved lots of liquor. (I know what you're thinking, but it wasn't like that.) My Abruzzese grandmother, Maria Tomassoni, used to set sour cherries out to dry in the sun and then preserve them in large glass jars in alcohol-laden syrup. Over the months, the syrup would thicken and the cherries and syrup both would darken to a deep, chocolaty red. We stirred the syrup into soda and ate the cherries by the spoonful. They were considered a remedy for "girl trouble," and my sister and I milked that for all we could. After my grandmother died in the 1970s, my mother and aunts began restricting our access to the remaining jars of cherries, and we didn't mind. We all knew how precious they were, and together we made the final jar last as long as we could.

It wasn't until the late 1980s that sour cherries entered my orbit again, when I headed to Detroit to take my first newspaper reporting job. By day I chased local news, but on my own time I chased local foods. I soon discovered that the northwestern part of the state along the shores of Lake Michigan (fondly known to Michiganders as Up North) is the sour cherry capital of the U.S.

The climate and soil conditions, combined with the lake effect, create ideal growing conditions for the fruit, which is what Catholic and Protestant missionaries discovered when they planted the

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first trees along Traverse Bay in the 1800s. If you drive up the coast in midsummer, around Traverse City or out on Old Mission Peninsula, you will see acres and acres of trees dripping with the luminous red fruit.

Places like The Cherry Republic have turned the sour cherry into a super-ingredient. At the company's store in the bucolic lake town of Glen Arbor, you can buy cherry barbecue sauce, cherry salsa, cherry burgers, cherry dogs, cherry iced tea and cherry lemonade. A few miles away in Beulah, The Cherry Hut has been turning out its famous cherry pies since 1922. I too began using cherries with abandon in my kitchen, in pies, cobblers and tarts, on their own or mixed with apricots, blueberries or plums. When I tossed them into my pound cake batter, I knew I had done a good thing. The tart fruit proved to be the perfect foil for the buttery rich cake.

Because sour cherries are so perishable, you never see them in supermarkets, except as jars of preserves or canned pie filling. When my husband and I moved to Virginia in 1995, I thought I had enjoyed my last fresh sour cherry. I was ecstatic when they turned up at my local farmers market toward the end of June. I pounced, purchasing three or four quarts at once. By then I had learned the trick to making these perishable gems last: Sour cherries happen to freeze beautifully. I pitted them, arranged them on baking sheets and set them in the freezer for a couple of hours, until they were hard. Then I transferred them to zipper-lock freezer bags and returned them to the freezer. Stored this way, the cherries will keep for an entire year.

Pitting them sounds like drudgery, but it's simple. Because sour cherries are so soft you can easily push out the pit with your fingers. Even better, use the paper clip trick: Unbend a clean paper clip to a long S-shaped wire with two curved ends. Gently push the smaller curved end into the cherry through the stem end until you reach the pit; then scoop it out. It's that easy. And when you sink your teeth into a sweet-tart slice of cherry pie or a piece of rich cherry pound cake, you will know that your small effort was well worth it.

About The Author

Domenica Marchetti is the author of *Big Night In: More Than 100 Wonderful Recipes for Feeding Family and Friends Italian-Style* and *The Glorious Soups and Stews of Italy* (both published by Chronicle Books). Her articles about contemporary Italian home cooking have appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Cooking Light*, *Fine Cooking* and other publications. She is at work on a third cookbook, about pasta. Visit her Web site at domenicacooks.com.