

# The New York Times

## The Fig Now Yields Its Charms



Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Fig and almond cake.

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There's a magnificent century-old fig tree on the farm my friend Bob Cannard has near Sonoma, Calif. It keeps giving fruit year after year. It's a mammoth of a tree, with thick, gnarled, low branches that span outward, then twist to form a natural gazebo 20 feet in diameter. You don't climb up the tree so much as step into it to find a place to perch.



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Baked figs and goat cheese.

It is possible to take refuge there year round, of course, but summer is the ideal time for it. Fat, ripe, juicy figs are always within arm's length.

Alas, most of us don't have a fig tree in the yard. This means you must either befriend someone who does, or do the best you can with store-bought figs. My advice is to buy more than you need.

A cook who possesses good figs can go sweet or savory. I like to bake them in an almond batter for a rustic cake to have with coffee or tea. Easier still are sugar-dusted baked figs, paired with crème fraîche or vanilla ice cream. Warm figs and goat cheese make a great first course, with a little sliced prosciutto or not. Or try a simple arugula and fig salad, with mashed figs and shallots in the dressing.

With figs, ripeness is everything. A ripe fig (the object of your desire) is soft, yielding, beginning to crack, nearly wrinkled. When you cut into it, the flesh is bright and juicy and the taste is ethereal.

Because most figs come to market underripe, the percentage of truly ripe ones in your purchase may be small. Here's what to do: Line a tray with a kitchen towel and lay out the less-than-ripe specimens, making sure they don't touch. Leave the tray at room temperature and pray. With luck, your figs will soften in a day or two. (Hard figs may never ripen, and you will probably lose some figs to mold.)

This is what fig lovers do when they are far from the source, although some plant trees in giant pots and bring them inside for the winter. I've done that, too, but my real fantasy is to have a giant fig tree like Bob's, right outside the kitchen door.

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