

Entertaining The Easy Way

The free email newsletter on good food and drink.

In this issue we look at different ways to use strawberries, their health benefits, how to prepare and store them, the Bio-Bee system and pesticides.

It's so easy to host the perfect meal, dinner or party and being the host doesn't mean that you can't enjoy the event every bit as much as your guests.

Tastes of the World's food ordering and catering service lets you entertain without spending hours shopping or cooking. Order just a few dishes or an entire menu including any furniture and equipment you require. Each order is individually prepared to your specific requirements.

Our autumn and winter menu is now available and includes some scrumptious new dishes, see below for details. Please note that Chanukah is early this year - it starts on the 5th of December, so to avoid disappointment, please call with your orders at least two weeks before. Our apologies to those clients who wished to place an order with us over New Year and Sukkot but were unable as Tastes of the World was inundated with orders during this busy holiday period.

Tastes of the World email address: shalet@bezeqint.net

Please forward to all your friends and colleagues so they can register to receive their own copy – see below.

Strawberry Fields Forever



May Hod Hasharon (and the surrounding areas) continue to have "Strawberry Fields Forever" - it was one of the unique features that attracted me to this area.

The strawberry is nutritious and delicious. The middle of November sees the start of the Israeli strawberry season, so prepare to gorge yourselves on these sweet treats.

How Strawberries got their name

The strawberry derives its name from the straw that was used to mulch the plants during the winter, a practice that discourages weeds and lifts the berries up from the soil. When it came to harvest the berries, children would pick them and string them on a blade of straw and sell "Straws of Berries."

Selecting the best strawberries

Strawberries are very perishable and do not ripen after harvesting; so they must be purchased a few days prior to use. Look for strawberries that are firm, plump, bright red in color with a natural sheen, with fresh looking attached green caps and a sweet aromatic scent. Avoid strawberries with green or white tips or patches since they are likely to be sour. Medium-sized strawberries are often more flavorsome than those that are excessively large.

Make sure that they are not packed too tightly (which may cause them to become crushed and damaged) and that the container has no signs of stains or moisture which can be an indication of spoilage. Israeli strawberries are usually available from November to May; the price reduces as the season progresses.

Storage

If you are not using the strawberries on the day of purchase, store them in the refrigerator in a single layer on a paper towel in a moisture proof container. Eat them within a couple of days.

Where to buy

Fresh is best, so try to shop at the edge of the field where they are grown. We are very lucky in Hod hasharon, Kfar Saba and Ra'anana to have strawberry fields on our doorstep. Also see below.

Preparation

Since they are very perishable, strawberries should not be washed until right before use or they will go soggy and lose their shape. Do not remove their caps and stems until after you have gently washed the berries under cold running water and patted them dry. This will prevent them from absorbing excess water, which can degrade strawberries' texture and flavor. To remove the stems, caps and white hull, simply pinch off with your fingers or use a paring knife. If serving whole, I often leave the stem on for colour. Over-chilling tends to inhibit their natural flavour; so best to serve at room temperature. Remove from the fridge about an hour before serving, or better still, buy and use immediately. The berries don't freeze well and lose their shape on defrosting. If you need to freeze, puree the fruit for use in mousses, soufflés, sorbet and ice cream.

Bio-Bee System and Pesticides

Marks and Spencer's, whose fruit and vegetables are considered one of the best (and most expensive) of all the English supermarkets, imports some of their strawberries from Ephraim Yosef. His family has produced strawberries in Hod Hasharon on the middle field in Sokolov and the field on Atzirei Zion for two generations. Everyone has their favorite place to purchase strawberries, I always buy from Ephraim, the quality and flavour of his produce is always outstanding and I particularly favor the Bio-Bee system that he uses.

In an exclusive interview with Ephraim, I discussed the use of chemicals in the production of strawberries. He uses the Bio-Bee Biological Systems, developed on Kibbutz Sde Eliyahu, which produces and implements beneficial insects for agricultural purposes. This includes natural enemies for pest control and bumblebees for natural pollination. The system aims at reducing the use of harsh chemical pesticides that endanger both man and the environment and the system is supervised by crop inspectors from Bio-Bee.

This system is good for the consumer, as it ensures that the product is grown under strict regulations, using natural solutions whenever possible, thus reducing chemical usage to a minimum and then, only permitted substances. Ephraim confirmed that the reduction of the use of harsh chemical pesticides against pests is about 90%, although some further lighter pesticides are needed to alleviate problems on leaves such as moulds. Organic compounds are used whenever possible.

Ephraim uses 'Bio Bee' bees to help pollinate the crops and 'Bio Bee' bugs to eat the insects that ruin the strawberries. The bugs used are not genetically engineered; they are just not found naturally in our area. It is a shame that the person who took the photos of his fields being sprayed last summer distributed them without first consulting with Ephraim to find out that they were in fact using an organic pesticide. Ephraim strives to protect the environment and uses natural solutions whenever possible.

The system is good for both the farmers and the environment. Pests can develop a tolerance towards chemical pesticides, meaning strawberries must be sprayed more often, with increasingly potent and expensive pesticides. Ultimately the pest gains complete immunity and a new, stronger chemical is needed. By comparison, using natural predators is more productive, less harmful to the environment and lasts throughout the season.

Methyl bromide gas, although banned in some countries as it is a large contributor to the destruction of the ozone, is still used in Israel to fumigate the earth of insects before planting begins. The Bio Bee method has however more than halved the quantity needed and the earth is covered in plastic to help reduce the amount of gas that escapes into the atmosphere. According to Ephraim, since the gas is used at least 3 months before harvesting there is no residue found in the fruits.

Types of strawberries

Believe it or not there are about 500 cultivated strawberry varieties worldwide. It's worth visiting a grower and exploring different varieties on offer, they usually let you taste the various types. Each variety will have its own distinctive flavour. Keep tasting throughout the season since the same variety of strawberry will taste different at various times of the year and different sizes of the same variety may taste different too.

Ephraim Yosef produces the following types: Tamar (the name 'date' reflects the shape), Yuval (named after his son) and malach (angel). The season begins with Tamar and Yuval, later malach emerges as they prefer the cooler weather and as we go into spring, Tamar and Yuval return.

Health benefits

- ❖ Rich in dietary fiber, folic acid, potassium and manganese

- ❖ They are filled with unusual phytonutrients which are believed to promote health
- ❖ The acids in the fruit help to remove stains so they can help whiten your teeth
- ❖ They are full of a special substance called ellagic acid which can help combat carcinogens
- ❖ They are full of antioxidant flavonoids, which form part of the strawberry's red colour; they are known to help reduce cholesterol and fight against cancer.
- ❖ Eight strawberries have more vitamin C than an orange, that's 140% of our daily recommended amount.
- ❖ They contain 0% fat



Strawberry Trivia

- ❖ Strawberries are the only fruit with seeds on the outside; the average strawberry has 200 seeds.
- ❖ The strawberry is technically a "false" fruit because it grows from the base rather than from the ovary of a flower, and so is not a true berry.
- ❖ The Romans loved their wild strawberries - and not only for their taste, they believed that strawberries could alleviate symptoms of a number of illnesses
- ❖ Madame Tallien, a prominent figure at the court of the Emperor Napoleon, was famous for bathing in the juice of fresh strawberries. She used 22 pounds per basin. Needless to say, she did not bathe daily.

Quick and easy ways to serve strawberries

The fragrantly sweet juiciness and deep red color of strawberries can brighten up both the taste and aesthetics of any meal and they are so versatile.

- ❖ *Breakfast smoothie*: liquidize some strawberries with a banana or a kiwi; add a few spoonfuls of yoghurt and a splash of milk. Sweeten with honey.
- ❖ *Strawberry sauce*: whiz up 350g strawberries with 70ml of sugar syrup, add a squeeze of lemon and spoon over ice cream, decorate with a few shavings of dark chocolate.
- ❖ *Glazed strawberries*: heat a knob of butter, add a few handfuls of halved strawberries, a splash of red wine vinegar and a little sugar, heat for 2 -3 minutes, shaking the pan until the fruit is shiny but still firm. Cool slightly, scatter with mint.
- ❖ *Chocolate strawberries*: gently melt some dark chocolate until silky and smooth. Dip in the strawberries to coat them and allow them to set on a sheet of greased proof paper. White chocolate may also be used, add a tablespoon of brandy before melting the chocolate if desired. Leave the stems on for added color.
- ❖ *Balsamic strawberries*: wash, hull and half a few handfuls of strawberries, add a splash of good quality balsamic vinegar and a little freshly ground black pepper to bring out the sweetness of the strawberries.
- ❖ *Strawberry mousse*: whip up a carton of double cream with 2 tbsp sugar. Puree 8 strawberries and fold through the cream. Spoon into individual glasses and chill.

- ❖ *Fruit salad*: wash, hull and half a few handfuls of strawberries, sprinkle lightly with sugar, add a few ripped mint leaves and a dash of orange liqueur. Leave on one side for an hour or two - until the fruit has made its own delicious, scented syrup. Serve with ice cream or a dollop of whipped cream.
- ❖ *Salad*: add sliced strawberries to mixed green salad. Dress with a balsamic vinegar dressing.
- ❖ *Pancake/waffle topping*: mix chopped strawberries with cinnamon, lemon juice and maple syrup and serve as a topping for waffles and pancakes.
- ❖ *Fruit kebabs*: select other brightly colored fruits such as melon (yellow and orange) kiwi, oranges and grapes and thread onto a wooden skewer. Drizzle with melted chocolate for the kids.
- ❖ *Eaton Mess*: mash a small punnet of strawberries with a sprinkling of sugar and a dash of port. Fold in broken meringues and softly whipped cream. Pour into glasses.
- ❖ *Strawberry Daiquiri*: place 4 strawberries, 2 tsp sugar, 35ml white rum and 20ml lemon juice into the base of a cocktail shaker and mash with the end of a clean rolling pin. Place the lid onto the cocktail shaker and shake, strain the mixture into a Martini glass and garnish with half a strawberry.
- ❖ *Strawberry margaritas*: put 5 strawberries into a liquidizer with 1 tbsp lime juice, 90ml of tequila and 30ml of Cointreau, whiz to a puree, then add a few ice cubes and pulse until the ice is crushed. Pour into 2 chilled margarita glasses with sugar dusted rims

Other uses

Make a big batch of strawberry jam towards the end of the season when prices are cheap. You'll need to add quite a bit of lemon juice to set the jam.

Serve them on top of your breakfast cereal.

Use strawberries to dip into a chocolate fondue

The following are all great made with strawberries, pies, tarts, muffins, pavlova, sorbet, ice cream, cheese cake, shortcake and soufflé.

Enjoy the fragrantly sweet juiciness of the strawberry.

Our autumn and winter menu is now available.

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