



IN SEASON: BERRIES

By Claudia Alarcon

Abundant and beloved the world over, berries are a diverse group of fruits encompassing different botanical families. But, what exactly makes a fruit a berry? In everyday and culinary terms, a berry is any small, edible fruit with multiple seeds. In botany, however, the New World Encyclopedia defines a berry as “a fleshy or pulpy indehiscent fruit in which the entire ovary wall ripens into a relatively soft pericarp, the seeds are embedded in the common flesh of the ovary, and typically there is more than one seed.” Thus, botanically speaking, tomatoes, grapes, avocados and persimmon are all — surprisingly — berries, while aggregate fruits such as the blackberry, the raspberry and the boysenberry, which develop from several ovaries, are not. Turns out that blueberries are false berries, raspberries and blackberries are aggregate fruit and strawberries are accessory fruit. We learn something new every day.

For the purpose of this article we will stick to the common, cuisine-centric definition of berries, and what better place to start than the queen of them all. The strawberry, a member of the rose family, is unique in that it is the only fruit with seeds on the outside rather than the inside. The ancient Romans believed that strawberries alleviated symptoms of melancholy, fainting, inflammations, fevers, throat infections, kidney stones, halitosis, gout and diseases of the blood, liver and spleen. The first documented botanical illustration of a strawberry plant appeared as a figure in Herbaries in 1454, but Native Americans were already eating strawberries, crushed and mixed with cornmeal and baked into bread, when the Colonists arrived. In 1780, the first strawberry hybrid, “Hudson,” was developed in the United States, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The blueberry, of the genus *Vaccinium*, is one of the few fruits native to North America. Northeastern tribes revered blueberries and developed much folklore around them. They used parts of the plant as medicine, like a tea made from the leaves that was thought to be good for the blood. They used the juice to treat coughs and as an excellent dye for baskets and cloth. In food preparation they added dried blueberries to stews, soups and meats, and they crushed them into a powder and rubbed into meat for flavor. A type of jerky called Sautauthig (pronounced saw’-taw-teeg), was made with dried blueberries and meat and was consumed year-round. From these peoples, colonists learned how to gather blueberries, sun-dry them and store them for the winter. Blueberries became an important food source, and were preserved and later canned. Today, we know that all berries contain antioxidants, having oxygen radical absorbance capacity that is

highest among the fruits, hence their medicinal properties. The fruits of the genus *Rubus* of the rose family (Rosacea) species, such as raspberries, blackberries, dewberries, and hybrids such as loganberry, boysenberry and tayberry, are technically aggregates of drupelets. Unlike the hollow fruits of raspberries, the drupelets of blackberries remain attached to a juicy white core, thus distinguishing the two. Blackberries are native to Asia, Europe, North America, Australia, Africa and South America, and have the most widespread geographic origin of any fruit crop. Blackberries have been used in Europe for over 2,000 years, consumed as food, for medicinal purposes and planted in hedgerows to keep out intruders with their thorny brambles. The colder regions of Alaska, Canada and Scandinavia are rich in low-growing boreal, arctic or alpine species of edible berries such as Alpine strawberry, cranberry, cloudberry, lingonberry, bilberry, sea buckthorn and elderberry. These are an important source of vitamins, antioxidants, essential fatty acids and boast high nutritional values, characteristics that place them in the highly coveted category of super fruits. Texas grows a number of berries, both commercially and in home gardens and urban farms. Blackberries, blueberries and strawberries do very well in Central and South Texas soil and climate, with Poteet being the Strawberry Capital of Texas. Every spring, local chefs and mixologists look forward to the bounty of seasonal berries. “I love the berries of Central Texas, and definitely get excited when the different berries start coming into season,” says Austin chef Philip Speer. “From the green strawberries to the sweetest blackberries and raspberries of the spring, we have some of the best around!” Speer started his career as a pastry chef at Jean-Luc’s Bistro and Starlite before joining the Uchi team, where he was Executive Pastry Chef and eventually Director of Culinary Operations. He has been very busy over the last 18 months working on his very own concept, Bonhomie, which opened in central Austin in late March. “I remember when I started using green strawberries at the end of the winter in 2006 [at Uchi], and the farmers were so confused as to why we were ordering those. They didn’t want to sell them to us. John Lash of Farm to Table was laughing at us because the strawberry farmers in Poteet thought we were just ordering them too early. But we were using them as a pickle with a dessert, shaved and sweet-pickled with strawberry soda, sorbet, and sweet cream croquant. The following year, we got a jump on the crop and were able to use a lot of them!” At his newly-opened Bonhomie, he continues using Texas berries in innovative ways. “We are excited about using our state’s berries in a delicious jam for our Monte Cristo that will be on our brunch menu: crispy-fried ham and cheese sandwich with bright and sweet blackberry and thyme jam!”

Speer’s wife, Callie, is also an award-winning pastry chef whose resume includes stints at legendary Austin restaurants like Mars, Jeffrey’s, Parkside and Swift’s Attic, where she excelled in transforming childhood favorites into delights for grown-ups. “I like to use berries because they evoke nostalgia in people. Everyone has memories of strawberry ice cream or blueberry pie, and (as we all know) I like to play on people’s familiarities with ingredients. I like to use berries in sweet applications, but add funky, savory twists to them. An example that I recently made is a super comfort food-y blackberry cobbler with brown butter, but then topped it with pickled blackberries, sour cream and fresh thyme.” Like her husband, Callie is also branching out with her own highly-anticipated endeavor, a punk rock diner called Bombshell set to open in downtown Austin in May. “I will also absolutely be doing some things at the new place with fresh berries,” says the chef. “We have a soft serve machine, so people can definitely expect some fun, whimsical soda fountain-style desserts. Berries are one of my absolute favorite things, so they’ll for sure make an appearance.” ♦

CENTRAL TEXAS PICK-YOUR-OWN FARMS

There are many local farms where berry fans can pick their own blackberries, strawberries, and blueberries. The season starts in late March or early April, and goes until June, depending on the berry and variety. Check these spots out and reach out for more information. Bring gloves, a hat, sunscreen, water and have fun!

FREDERICKSBURG:
MARBURGER ORCHARD, www.marburgerorchard.com

BASTROP:
SWEET EATS FRUIT FARM, www.sweeteats.com

POTEET:
SANCHEZ FARMS, 210-415-7316

MARBLE FALLS:
SWEET BERRY FARM, 830-798-1462