

Make Dates And Dried Figs Work For You

How to market dates and dried figs during baking season, the holidays and beyond.

BY JACKIE LIEBERMAN

Mostly displayed during the holiday season, dates and dried figs are an untapped source of sales for much of the year. Although their use in the United States was once confined almost entirely to baking, over the past few years dates and dried figs have gained more consumer attention.

Linda Cain, vice president of marketing, Valley Fig Growers, Fresno, CA, believes much of this popularity comes from use in recipes in magazines like *Food & Wine*, on The Food Network and in restaurants.

"We're seeing a lot more interest in figs from consumers than ever before," says Cain. "People now recognize that you can do things like figs and red wine over ice cream, which is a very simple and somewhat healthy dessert. They're recognizing that, 'Wow, these are tasty and healthy.' Figs pair well with a number of items, from apples to cheeses. They've got a tremendous nutritional punch, too."

Dried figs are a real advantage to the cost-conscious consumer — especially, she says, because dried figs are relatively interchangeable with fresh figs in recipes.

David Nelson, vice president of Bard Valley Date Growers Association, Bard, CA, agrees that consumer interest in dates and figs has spiked in the past few years. "The biggest thing is the overall exposure the fresh Medjool date now has that it didn't have before. The large size of the Medjool is attractive to people," especially to those who have never tried them.

"Right now dried fruit is very, very strong, and it's important to promote all dried fruit, not just blueberries and cherries," says Andrew Stillman, president of Amport Foods/American Importing Co.,

Inc., one of the largest importers of dates in North America, based in Minneapolis, MN.

"The dried fig category is growing," says Cain. "It's one of the few categories within dried fruit that is growing. People are seeking different types of fruit than what was previously available to them."

Another plus for both the retailer and the consumer is the shelf life of these products. "Dried dates are the most stable food on earth," says Stillman. "They will not perish. They will last for years. And it's one of the cheapest, healthiest dried fruits available."

Cain reinforces this view. "Dried figs never go bad, although they're optimal consumed sooner rather than later. We have a two-year shelf life on our products. It's an item that holds up really well."

The recently revised U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Guide Pyramid is a boon because it has consumers looking for new ways to incorporate fruit into their diets — especially those, such as dates and figs, that are fiber-rich and nutrient-dense.

"Baking used to be the major way people used dates," says Stillman. "Today people are using them in things like cereal and salads because of their health benefits."

Amport prints recipes on packages to attract health-conscious consumers. "One of the more popular recipes we have is for oatmeal-date cookies," says Stillman. "Dates have a naturally sweet taste that appeals to children. They're healthier than even raisins because they offer more nutritional value. Dates are an exceptional source of fiber and very high in potassium, so parents know that two of these cookies are a nutritional alternative to a Snickers bar in a lunchbox."

Says Cain, "Athletes like runners and cyclists often rely upon dried figs for nutrient- and energy-density."



Photo courtesy of Valley Fig Growers

One of the winning entries in the 2004 Valley Fig Growers display contest.

And while dates and dried figs are perfect for recipes, they can also be eaten out of hand. Peter Kopke, president of William H. Kopke, Jr., Inc., a Lake Success, NY, importer of Greek dried figs, says, "You can eat figs any time — as a snack or as dessert."

THE DISPLAY MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

Retailers do not have to choose between displaying dried or fresh dates or between imported and domestic. Each appeals to consumers in a different way.

Says Stillman, "You wouldn't carry only one kind of apple, and you shouldn't carry only one kind of date."

He says chopped dates outsell whole dates because bakers want convenience. For that reason, Amport offers a free-standing floor display with 70 percent chopped dates and 30 percent pitted whole dates.