



Chef Steve Ceron, right, is owner of Apricot Wood California BBQ and Damasco Fine Foods and Spirits in Patterson, and uses locally grown apricots in many of his dishes, including apricot upside-down cake, below.



Adaptable apricots

Golden fruit of summer is a little sweet, a little tangy

Ranging in flavor from sweet to tart, apricots are among the parade of tree fruits for which California is famous.

Referred to as a stone fruit because it contains one large central pit or stone, the small, velvety-skinned apricot has won over chefs and home cooks alike with its versatility.

Chef Steve Ceron, owner of Apricot Wood California BBQ and Damasco Fine Foods and Spirits in Patterson, said he is inspired by the many possibilities offered by the fruit, which flourishes in nearby orchards.

“We use apricots for everything from pizza to pork chops, cheese platters and spreads,” said Ceron, who moved from Las Vegas to the Central Valley to be closer to his wife’s family. “We put them in our salads, we wrap them with prosciutto and we make preserves.”

At his barbecue restaurant, Ceron smokes meats, vegetables and other foods with wood from apricot orchards.

“Apricot wood is one of the finest woods you can smoke with. It has a very light flavor, is not overwhelming and smoky, and has a little sweetness,” he explained. “We use it for everything.”

For customers who enjoy liquid re-

freshment, his fine-dining restaurant offers apricot-based cocktails including martinis and mojitos.

“Any beverage that you can put a spin on with apricots, we do,” Ceron said.

A heritage worth celebrating

To pay homage to the local community, Ceron named one of his two restaurants Damasco, which is the Portuguese word for apricot.

“There were a lot of Portuguese settlers here and there still are Portuguese families here. I think the (apricot) farmers appreciate that we give them a shout-out,” the chef said. “Apricot season is a good time around Patterson. Patterson wouldn’t be here without the apricots. At one point, this was the apricot capital of the world. I am honored to be here and to be part of it.”

The Westley-Patterson area is considered one of the world’s best places to grow apricots because of its Mediterranean climate and well-drained soils. Each summer, the Patterson Apricot Fiesta celebrates the city’s heritage and the famous Patterson apricot that bears its name. This year’s event is June 3-5.



Three generations of the Bays family operate Bays Ranch in Westley. From left above, Gene, Daniel and Ken Bays grow apricots for canning, freezing and drying. Once the fruit is harvested, left, farmer Dave Santos of Lucich-Santos Farms in Patterson, below, packs apricots for the fresh market.



Apricots debuted in California in the gardens of the Spanish missions, and the state's first considerable production of the fruit was recorded near San Francisco in 1792. Today, California farmers grow more than 95 percent of the nation's apricots, which are rich in antioxidants, beta-carotene, vitamin C, potassium and iron.

Apricot harvest begins in Kern County and moves northward through the San Joaquin Valley to the Westley-Patterson area. The trees bloom from early February to early March, with harvest typically happening in May through July.

Variety in the orchards

Lucich-Santos Farms in Patterson grows 700 acres of conventional and organic apricots, primarily to be eaten fresh. Most of the fruit is shipped to wholesale and retail outlets throughout North America; the remainder is sold for drying, canning, freezing or juicing.

"The Patterson is our largest apricot variety and makes up about half of what we pack," said Dave Santos, who co-owns the business with his brother-in-law, Pete Lucich. "The Patterson is the epitome of what an apricot should taste like, with the right amount of sweetness and tartness. The consumer can eat it fresh, can it, make jam or puree. It's an all-purpose piece of fruit."

Santos grows many other apricot varieties, including the aprium, which is a cross between an apricot and a plum.

"The Golden Sweet is my favorite of all of the apricots. It has the appearance of a Blenheim, but you bite into it and it has a bit of a crunch to it," Santos said, referring to an older variety known for its sweet-tart flavor and intense orange color. "I also like a Patterson apricot very much—a delicious, ripe Patterson, you can't beat it."

Family traditions

With his family, Daniel Bays operates Bays Ranch, a 2,000-acre mix of apricots and other crops in Westley. The family sells its apricots to processors who slice the fruit for canned or frozen products or use it to make brand-name jams, juices, sauces and baby food. Some of the crop is also dried and sold at farmers markets.

"My family started farming apricots in the 1960s, so apricots have always been part of the farm," Bays said. "We grow the Patterson variety, as it is a good, versatile variety."

Bays said he likes apricots in all forms, from fresh off the tree to the dried or processed forms that allow him to eat the fruit year-round.

"Dried is probably my favorite way to enjoy apricots—just as a snack—but I enjoy canned apricots over a little vanilla ice cream as well," he said.

California farmers sell about 34,500 tons of apricots each year, with the great majority of the fruit coming from San Joaquin Valley orchards.

"The season for California apricots is a short one, but the flavor, quality and color are unmatched by foreign fruit," Bays said. "They are a great addition to many dishes, providing sweet and tangy flavor that has a little more of a 'bite' than peaches or pears. They are a great fruit to start off the summer fruit season." 

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FIT TO BE DRIED

Sun-dried California apricots are an ideal snack for today's health-conscious, on-the-go lifestyle.

"If you are taking a trip and you want to have some snacks, take dried apricots," said Bill Ferreira, president of the Apricot Producers of California. "It's a perfect thing to have wherever you go."

Drying, one of the oldest methods of preserving food, removes the moisture so bacteria, yeast and mold cannot grow and spoil the food. Enjoying dried apricots year-round caught on in the 1920s and 1930s, Ferreira said, a time when California farmers produced almost 200,000 tons of dried apricots annually.

"It takes about 6 pounds or more of fresh apricots to make 1 pound of dried apricots and as a result, you get very intense flavor in the dried fruit," Ferreira said. "Apricots are dried the same way today that they were dried 100 years ago."

The Patterson and Blenheim apricot varieties work well for drying because of their flavor and appearance when dried, Ferreira said. Fresh apricots are cut in half, a small amount of sulfur is added to preserve color and the fruit is placed on wooden trays in the sun.

"Drying time depends on how hot it is, but apricots could dry in three or four days," Ferreira said. The fruit then goes into cold storage before packaging.

About 15 percent of the fresh apricots produced in California go to the dried market. Ferreira said demand for apricots has increased as people become more interested in healthy snacking and sourcing fruit locally.



Apricots are dried by cutting the fresh fruit in half and adding a small amount of sulfur to preserve color. The fruit is then placed on wooden trays, left, to dry in the California sun.

