

# Plums

Britain produces the best orchard fruit in the world so it would be a shame to let the season slip by without putting the crop to good use, writes Tonia George. Photographs by Michael Paul

FOR THE FIRST TWO YEARS IN OUR HOUSE THE only tree in our garden was a crooked eyesore that sprouted nothing but long branches of leaves. One weekend, we decided it was due for a makeover and brazenly hacked off all its limbs, shaping it into a neat little tree, fit for our neat little London garden. The next spring, we started to notice small, hard, green fruit appear and by August those branches were laden down with more than a hundred bloomy, blushing Victoria plums. We had no idea we were such talented gardeners.

In Britain, there are 330 varieties of plum, including related greengages and damsons. Brogdale Horticultural Trust in Kent has a living library of them all; if you've inherited a mystery tree, as we did, you can send in a few of your fruit and they will identify them for you. At this time of the year, it's well worth seeking out some of these rare varieties that are regaining popularity. If you're looking to fill the fruit bowl, the dainty, purple Opal, the larger, juicier Reeves or the fine flavoured Excalibur are all good bets in August. You may also stumble across the golden-fleshed Early Laxton or Coe's Golden Drop at farmers' markets, both very juicy with a high sugar content and perfect for eating as they are. Don't forget about the wonderful greengage either. A plum in all but name, the Reine Claude (as it was known) was brought over from France in 1724 by Sir William Gage, but its labels got lost along the way. Its patron's name and the colour of its skin were combined to create its new moniker.

If you're after a plum to cook with, however, you'll need something much more tart. In fact, sour plums blossom in the kitchen; poach them in a liquor made from caramel thinned with a fruity red wine and all their bitterness is beautifully offset. Plums also collapse gracefully when roasted with a splash of liquid. This is what makes plum crumble such a wonderful thing, with its scarlet, jammy juices bubbling up to stain its sweet,

biscuity crust. The Marjorie Seeding and the blue-black Czar, so named because its first fruiting coincided with a visit from the Russian emperor, are both fine cookers. Damsons, which appear in hedgerows in late August, are smaller and even more sour; they make fabulous jam with much more flavour and acidity than plums. And, of course, there's always the milder tasting Victoria, with its peach-and-cerise-blushed skin, which is as happy being baked into an almond cake as it is eaten on a picnic.

These tarter plums also lend something to fattier meats such as goose, duck and pork, especially when lightly spiced with cinnamon, cloves or star anise. Ignore purists who tell you to remove the skin before cooking; I prefer to throw in whole plums, peeling off their skins once cooked or sieving them out if need be. If you want to fold a purée of stewed plums into some clouds of whipped cream for a fool, or pair them with a rich duck breast wrapped in a layer of crisp fat, you really need the acidity the skins supply. Jamie Oliver has a lovely recipe for plums stewed into a jammy sauce with muscavado sugar, star anise and ginger, which he rolls up inside steamed, wafer-thin slices of pork (see his book, *Happy Days with the Naked Chef*, for the recipe). If it's a sunny day and there's any of this sauce left from the night before, I like to splash a bit of soy in it to

use as a glaze on barbecued spare ribs, which I precook in apple juice; this saves waiting for them to cook through on the grill, so they can be rescued while they're nicely, not savagely, charred.

When buying plums, smell rather than squeeze them to gauge their ripeness; a squeeze damages them and may simply indicate that a lot of squeezing has gone on before. Incidentally, the bloom on plums can be a handy indicator as it shows they haven't been too manhandled.

As with all stone fruits, ripeness is all. I couldn't agree more with Nigel Slater: "a plum is rarely worth eating until you have to shoo the flies away with a tea towel." If picked before fully ripe, plums ripen further if left on a warm windowsill; their flavour won't improve, but their texture and juiciness will. Unfortunately, most people who claim to dislike plums have probably bitten into the tongue-curlingly sour skin of a culinary plum or, more likely, an underripe eater.

The stones in different plum varieties have varying degrees of clinginess. Nature planned it badly when she decided to give the culinary varieties the clingier ones (the exception is the Victoria, which has a relatively free stone). I find gouging them out really tedious, so if I can leave them in, I do; they're big enough to spot later. Jane Grigson recommends cracking the stones open and removing the kernel to put in the pot when making jam. Being incredibly lazy, I've never tried this, though I have kept in whole stones while making jam, removing them once they get spread on my buttered crumpet.

This year, the branches of my plum tree are reaching for the skies once again, though they are bearing nothing but foliage. Our pruning skills were clearly a happy accident. We do, however, now know a thing or two about using up vast quantities of ripe plums.

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## Plum & apple chutney

Chutney is the best way to use up a glut of plums and if you have a neighbour who has a Bramley apple tree, it's a good time to trade. Enjoy this with coarse pâtés and hunks of Cheddar on picnics, or serve alongside some baked goat's cheese.

MAKES 1-1¼KG

PREPARATION TIME: 25 MINUTES

COOKING TIME: 1½-2 HOURS

- 2 tbsp Sunflower oil
- 3 Onions, peeled and finely chopped
- 2 Garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
- 1 tbsp Root ginger, grated
- 1 Dried chilli
- 1 tsp Ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp Allspice
- 1.2kg Plums, or a 2:1 mix of plums and damsons, halved and stoned (though you can leave the stones in, as long as you don't mind dodging them later)
- 1 Large cooking apple, cored, peeled and roughly chopped
- 350g Light muscavado sugar
- 400ml Cider vinegar

Heat the oil in a large saucepan (not made of aluminium or copper) and add the onion, garlic, ginger, chillies and spices. Sauté gently for 10 minutes, stirring until the onions are softened and beginning to look lightly golden.

Add the plums, apples and any juices to the onions. Add a generous amount of seasoning, the sugar and the vinegar and cook for 1½-2 hours until thick, stirring regularly to prevent it catching on the bottom of the pan. When it is ready you should be able to draw your spoon across the bottom of the pan and see a definite line being drawn.

Allow to cool slightly and then spoon into 6-8 x 175ml sterilised jars, cover with plastic discs to prevent the metal lids reacting with the vinegar, and seal them while the chutney is still warm. Store for at least 2 weeks before delving into the first one.

PER 50G SERVING: 59 KCALS/0.8G FAT/0.1G SATURATED FAT/TRACE SALT/12.7G SUGARS



## Crisp pork belly with plum sauce

The signature dish at Billy Kwong restaurant in Sydney is crisp-skinned duck, drenched in what the Australians call a blood plum sauce. However, I have a weakness for meltingly tender squares of pork belly, so I swapped this for the duck and discovered a match made in plum heaven.

SERVES 4

PREPARATION TIME: 25 MINUTES,  
PLUS OVERNIGHT MARINATING

COOKING TIME: 4 HOURS,  
PLUS 30 MINUTES RESTING

### CRISP PORK BELLY

- 1kg Pork belly, unrolled
- 2 tsp Five spice powder
- 1 tbsp Demerara sugar
- 1 Lime, finely grated zest

½ tsp Chilli flakes

### PLUM SAUCE

- 125g Demerara sugar
- 6 Plums
- 4 Star anise
- 3 Cinnamon sticks
- 3 tbsp Fish sauce
- 2-3 Limes, juiced

Pierce the pork all over with the tip of a knife, through the fat but not into the meat, so you make 50 or so slits. Transfer to a wire rack over the sink. Boil a kettle and pour the water over the pork to open up the holes you've just made. Dry with kitchen paper and leave for an hour.

When ready to cook, rub the pork with the five spice, sugar and lime zest; chill. Preheat the oven to 190°C/gas 5. Put the pork, on its wire rack, on a roasting tray. Roast for 1 hour. Turn down the oven to 140°C/gas 2 and roast for 3 hours more, until the fat is dark brown and crackled.

Make the sauce. Place 125ml water, the sugar and spices in a pan and heat gently. Once the sugar has dissolved, turn up the heat and boil for 5 minutes till syrupy. Add the plums and fish sauce and simmer for another 3-4 minutes till the fruit softens and the juices are red. Add lime juice so it tastes quite tart and set aside for the flavours to mingle.

Remove the pork from the oven and rest for 30 minutes.

Turn the pork, crackling-side down, onto a chopping board and cut into chunks with a serrated knife. Serve 2 or 3 chunks to each person, along with some plum sauce.

PER SERVING: 627 KCALS/32.4G FAT/11.2G SATURATED FAT/2.4G SALT/44.7G SUGARS

**Wine** A fruity red cuts through the pork's fat. *Spice Route Pinotage 2004 Swartland, South Africa. Bin 13065; £7.99.*







## Ingredient



### Roasted plums with cinnamon & orange yogurt ice cream

Plums release lots of juices when roasted and their flavour intensifies. After cooking, their bitter skins can be slipped off but leaving them on balances the sweetness of the yogurt. You could serve the plums cold, in which case they're better suited to custard; the frozen yogurt needs a bit of heat to allow it to melt into the plum juices.

SERVES 4

PREPARATION TIME: 10–15 MINUTES, PLUS  
20 MINUTES CHURNING AND 2 HOURS FREEZING

COOKING TIME: 30 MINUTES

#### ICE CREAM

1 Orange, juice and finely grated zest

75g Caster sugar

50g Unsalted butter

2 Large eggs, plus 1 egg yolk

450ml Greek yogurt

½ tsp Ground cinnamon

#### ROASTED PLUMS

12 Plums, halved and stoned

2 tbsp Soft brown sugar

25g Butter

75ml Red wine

Place the orange juice and zest, the sugar, butter and eggs in a saucepan and cook over a low heat till the mixture thickens slightly. Strain into a freezerproof container and cool.

Beat in the yogurt and cinnamon, and churn the mixture in an ice-cream maker for 20 minutes. If you don't have an ice-cream maker, pour into a freezerproof container and place in the freezer. Take out after an hour, transfer to a large bowl and whisk to break up any large ice crystals, freeze for another hour, repeat, and return to the freezer.

Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas 6. Put the plums in a baking dish and scatter with the sugar, dot with the butter and splash over the wine. Cover with foil and roast for 30 minutes till soft. Remove from the ice cream from the freezer 15 minutes before you wish to serve and leave it to soften in the fridge. Serve scoops of the ice cream with the hot plums and their juices.

PER SERVING: 563 KCALS/32.1G FAT/19G SATURATED FAT/  
0.4G SALT/55.9G SUGARS