

BIG FIG GIG

BY ROSE LIMA WITH PHOTOS BY EARL BLOOR



The California Fig Advisory Board identifies 9,300 fig-producing acres in the state. Bob Steinacher figures that with 172 of those acres under his care at Maywood Farms in Corning, his is “a mid-sized farm.” His family grows organic figs, and last year they hit a big milestone: it was the first year they sold all their certified organic figs on the organic market.

Bob has come a long way since 1981, when he bought the property in Corning; since 1983, when he himself hand-picked, -packed, and -delivered his first small harvest of figs; and since 1998, when the first twenty-five acres were certified organic and he began to move all the acreage to organic certification.

Educated as an entomologist at UC Davis, Bob researched outside in the fields. It made him realize he wanted to farm—and maybe his focus on pesticide resistance in cotton farming influenced his choice to grow organic. When he found the land in Corning, it had never been cultivated but stretched out as grasslands used mainly for sheep grazing. “My neighbors probably thought, ‘here’s some guy in Birkenstocks come to grow organic,’” he joked. Farming figs drew him because of Mediterranean climate here and the hardiness of



HOW RAVEN STOLE THE FIG

The Maywood Farms website explains that the Tehama fig logo represents a raven flying off with a ripe fig in its beak, and indeed, birds do love ripe figs. The image actually comes from the Pacific Northwest Tlingit people and is associated with a creation tale featuring the Trickster Raven. There are many versions of “How Raven Stole the Sun,” but in all of them, the world lives in darkness except for one man, sometimes an old man, sometimes a greedy Tribal chief, whose abode is filled with light. Using different ruses in different versions, Trickster Raven discovers the light is formed by the stars, the moon, and the sun, and he steals them then hurls them into the sky, and all the people live in light.

This tale might serve as an allegory for the Steinachers’ big fig marketing gig, when last year they succeeded in marketing all their fresh fig crop as organic figs, a kind of hurling into the world the bright figs, organic and delicious.

Ficus carica, which, he says, require little to no fertilizer, are not prone to fungus, and require less spraying than other fruits. “People say you can’t, but I’ve killed fig trees,” he admits.

One challenge is planting replacement trees, since the young trees have different water requirements than the established trees in the groves. Plus, gophers love fig roots, which run just under the surface of the ground at the perfect height for gopher burrows. Bob once investigated rings of

Fresh Fig & Avocado Salsa by Ingvard the Terrible from Edmond, Oklahoma (ingvard.com), courtesy of They Draw and Cook and the artist.

Fresh FIG & AVOCADO SALSA

INGREDIENTS

2 jalapeno peppers	2 tsp. sugar
1 3/4 cups diced fresh figs	1/4 tsp. salt
1 tbsp. lime juice	1/2 tsp. coriander
1 firm ripe avocado, diced	1/2 tsp. cumin
1 fresh ripe tomato, diced	1/4 tsp. garlic powder

Remove seeds and ribs from peppers and dice them. Combine all ingredients in a bowl and mix well. Chill for several hours.

CHOOSING FIGS

If you're shopping for fresh figs, an article in *Fine Cooking* magazine recommends choosing figs heavy for their size and slightly soft, even those a little wrinkled, possibly with cracks in the skin. Both very firm and overly squishy figs should be avoided, as should figs with mold. But if a little mold appears on a counter-ripening fig, just scrape it off with a knife, rinse the fig, and pop it right in your mouth. Many chefs recommend letting figs sit on the counter, with space around them for air to circulate and ripen them; others storing in the refrigerator.



Because figs ooze a white latex liquid that can be toxic, workers wear long sleeves and gloves while picking.

missing bark around the fig trunks. Field mice had eaten it. Mowing the covercrop in little circles around the trunks eliminated the damage, because then the mice were exposed to predators and thought twice about emerging for a fig bark meal.

Bob seems intrigued by the fig, its soft, pithy wood, its two annual harvests, its longevity. In the grove, the branches of the oldest fig trees wend out crookedly, near parallel to the ground. He points to the leaf nodes, where the figs appear twice in the season, first, called a breba crop, on last year's growth, then a few weeks later on this year's growth.

The fig is actually an inverted flower enclosed in stem tissue, explains Texas A & M's Extension service, and what we commonly think of as the seeds inside are the actual fruit or drupelets. When we eat a fig, we're actually eating a container and the fruits it contains.

One of few certified packer farmers in the state, Maywood Farms grows five varieties of figs that they pick, sort, pack, and ship: Mission, Adriatic, Brown Turkey, Kadota, and Excel. Picking/packing time is intense. "I live, eat, and breathe the figs," says Bob. In California, 90% of the fig crop is sold dried or processed and only 10% fresh; at Maywood, the ratios are almost reversed, 75% fresh market and just 25% dried. Ripe figs have a short shelf life, and Maywood ships both ripe

packs with a shelf life of five days and regular packs with a shelf life of two weeks or so—all stored and shipped under refrigeration. Bob says he has developed customers who value the quality of the figs they ship and the brimful open-pint baskets.

For these traits Bob credits the picking and packing crew, whom Karen Steinacher, Bob's wife, works with. They know which figs to pick (ripe figs bend a bit at the stem on the tree and are slightly soft).

The packers cull too-ripe figs and figs that come in from the grove minus the stem. Bob's foreman Mario Gomez, Gomez's wife, and a couple of their nephews have worked many years at Maywood Farms, the elder Gomezes for twenty plus years. Mario thanks Bob that this long service enabled him and his wife to buy a house in town, but Bob avers he himself is the grateful one.

Unfortunately for us in the North State, although some boxes of Maywood Farms organic figs go to local restaurants whose chefs know of their quality, most have gone to people elsewhere. Last year, 50% or more of the crop got picked

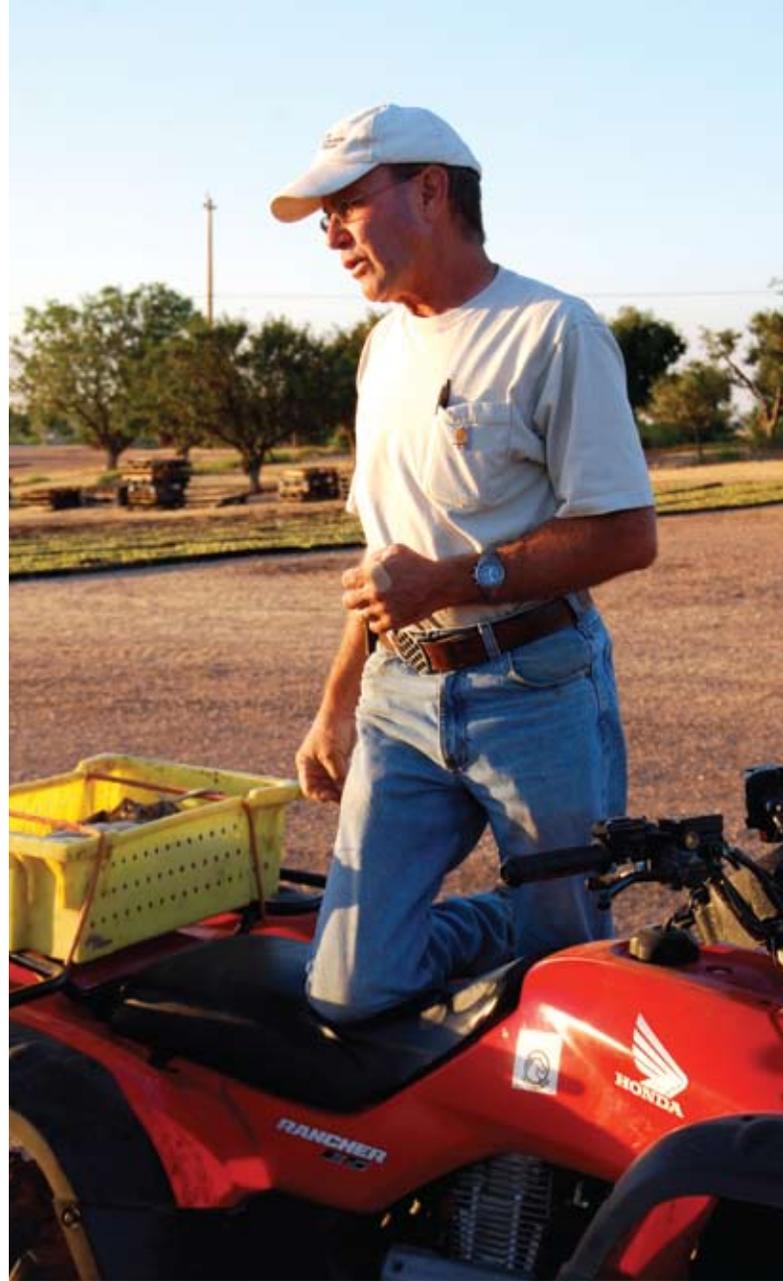
**"During harvest,
I live, eat, and
breathe the figs."
—Bob Steinacher**

up by Whole Foods Market trucks for sales in northern California and the Midwest. New Seasons Market in Oregon, another buyer, and an organic fruit distributor also distribute large quantities.

Last year, the Steinachers took their Whole Foods buyers to Leon's Bistro in Chico, where Ann Leon regaled them with a slew of fig dishes. (See Ann's recipes in *Cooking Fresh* on the next page.) She favors Maywood Farms Brown Turkey figs, which, in season, are a mainstay in a summer salad prepared at the Bistro: fresh greens tossed in lemon-infused extra virgin olive oil, chopped figs, and roasted red peppers. Ann also freezes whole boxes of figs packed in their plastic pint baskets, and the figs last for up to a year frozen. She says when she pulls them out and thaws them post-season, their texture makes it hard to tell they've even been frozen. The California Fresh Fig Board recommends freezing them singly on trays, much like berries, then putting the frozen fruits into freezer containers. Year-round figs! Ann says there is no reason not to eat figs year round; dried figs are easily reconstituted by soaking in warm water.

So many figs—but not Maywood Farms organic figs available for us locally? Well, there's another celebration we can anticipate. Bob and Karen's daughter Deena plans to move into the farm operations. Since she was in fifth grade, she has told people she wants to farm; she is drawn by the scent of the figs in the cooler during harvest. Deena may well be at local farmers' markets this fig season, selling baskets of Maywood Farms organic figs. Local farmers' market shoppers will be like the Chicago fan who sent a card, "Your figs rock!" and the So. Cal. chef who sent a picture of his Tehama fig tattoo. 🍷

Regular readers perhaps remember Rose Lima, who contributes to these pages in honor of her namesake, a patron saint of gardeners. Rose hasn't yet tried her namesake's habitual hairshirts, though sometimes, at magazine deadline, she is so tempted.



Bob Steinacher pauses to talk before heading out to monitor the harvest.

Robin's Fresh Fig Tart by Jackie Mancuso from Venice, CA (jackiemancuso.com), courtesy of They Draw and Cook and the artist.



ROBIN'S FIG TART

*IF YOU'RE OUT OF FIGS...
...COULD BE PEACHES

MAKE PREBAKED CRUST (CREAM 1 STICK UNSALTED BUTTER, MIX IN 1 c. POWDERED SUGAR, 3/4 c. FLOUR AND 1 EGG. DIVIDE INTO 2 BALLS, WRAP IN PLASTIC AND CHILL 2 HRS. YOU CAN MAKE THE FILLING BELOW IN THE MEANTIME.) THEN ROLL OUT 1 BALL. PRESS INTO TART PAN, TRIM EXCESS. CHILL 20 MINS. THEN BAKE AT 325° FOR 15-20 MINS. OR TIL EVENLY GOLDEN.

ALMOND CREAM FILLING GRIND 2c SLICED ALMONDS WITH 1 1/2c GRANULATED SUGAR. BEAT 2 STICKS UNSALTED BUTTER WITH 1c SUGAR. COMBINE THE 2 IN A BOWL. ADD 2 EGGS AND 1 YOLK ONE AT A TIME. BEAT TIL LIGHT AND FLUFFY. SPREAD INTO COOLED CRUST.

PURÉE LAYER REMOVE STEMS FROM 6 FRESH FIGS. PUREE THEM IN A FOOD PROCESSOR AND LAYER THIS OVER THE ALMOND CREAM FILLING.

FRUIT LAYER QUARTER 12 FRESH FIGS AND ARRANGE SKIN SIDE DOWN OVER THE PURÉE. BAKE 30 MINS. AT 325° OR UNTIL FILLING IS GOLDEN. COOL 10 MINS. BRUSH WITH GLAZE.

LAST, GLAZE WARM 1/4c APRICOT JAM, THEN PUSH THROUGH SIEVE TO REMOVE PIECES. BRUSH TART WITH GLAZE.



THEY DRAW AND COOK

...COULD BE PLUMS

...COULD BE APRICOTS

COOKING FRESH

RECIPES FOR SUMMER



FIGS BAKED IN FIG LEAVES

Chef Brett Lamott of Café Maddalena in Dunsmuir offers this summer dessert. Serves 4.

12 fresh figs (approximately 1 ounce each), stems trimmed

12 fig leaves approximately 5 inches long, washed and dried, stems trimmed (available at some farmers' markets and from growers)

4 ounces unsalted butter at room temperature

2 tablespoons of granulated sugar

4 ounces heavy whipping cream whipped to medium peaks

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

With the pastry brush, butter the inside of a baking dish large enough to hold the wrapped figs and sprinkle with 1 tablespoon sugar.

Place a fig leaf on a cutting board, leaf stem side toward you with the rough side up. Brush lightly with butter on both sides.

Put 1 fig in the center of the leaf; fold the bottom of the leaf over the fig, then fold one side in and then the other. Roll to the top. Place in the baking dish with the top side down so it won't unroll. Repeat until all figs are wrapped and placed in the baking dish. Sprinkle the wrapped figs with the remaining tablespoon of sugar.

Bake at 350 degrees for ½ hour. Remove from the oven and let rest for 5 minutes.

To serve, place 3 rolls on a plate. Unwrap 1 roll leaving the fig in the leaf and place a dollop of unsweetened whipping cream on top.

Note: While the fig leaves are edible, a little goes a long way. The leaves impart a slight flavor of coconut to the figs.

Variation: Try substituting apricots or peaches for the figs.

FIG BACON MARMALADE

Ann Leon, of Leon's Bistro on Main Street in Chico, served this marmalade when she hosted a gathering for the Steinacher family and some of the buyers of their Maywood Farms figs. The marmalade finds many uses in Ann's kitchen, some of which are included in the serving ideas below.

1–2 pounds nitrate-free bacon, depending on how meaty you want the marmalade

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

3 pounds Walla Walla or Spanish sweet onions, sliced in crescents

1 teaspoon salt

½ cup balsamic vinegar

¼ cup agave syrup

¼ cup minced roasted garlic

3 baskets Brown Turkey (or other) figs, stemmed and quartered

Soft-cook bacon to remove some of the fat; cut in 1-inch pieces.

Heat the olive oil in a frying pan and then add onions along with the salt. Begin to cook slowly towards caramelization. Just before caramelization, add balsamic vinegar, agave syrup, and the partly-cooked bacon. Continue caramelizing; add salt and pepper to taste.

Add figs to the onion mixture for the last 15 minutes. If not overcooked, they will retain their fig appearance.

Cool and serve, or store in the refrigerator for up to a month.

Serving ideas:

- Use the marmalade in scrambled eggs (add some greens).
- Brush onto a steak before grilling.
- Smear it on pizza dough, top with crumbled gorgonzola cheese to taste, and bake. Add fresh, torn arugula atop.
- Grilled Stuffed Figs: Leave stems on figs and toss in vinaigrette. Grill the figs until soft; watch and turn so they don't burn. Cut an X in the bottom of each fig, and stuff with warm fig marmalade. Press a little gorgonzola butter into the marmalade stuffing. (To make gorgonzola butter, use a 4:1 ratio of gorgonzola cheese to butter. Bring both to room temperature and mix them together in a food processor or with a fork.)