



Story by Carol Goodman Kaufman

And they shall sit everyone under their vine and under their fig-tree;
And none shall make them afraid. Micah 4:4

What an idyllic vision. The image of everybody with their own vine and fig tree has always been considered an indicator not only of peace, but of wealth and prosperity. Because cultivation of figs is an arduous and time-consuming task, a prolonged period of peace and tranquility, such as that experienced during the reign of the biblical King Solomon, is necessary to provide the freedom to cultivate them.

I can just picture Solomon sitting in his palace garden with a stylus, composing this verse for his beloved in the Song of Songs (2:13): “The fig tree ripens her green figs. The vines are in blossom. They give forth their fragrance. Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away.” He had me at “figs.”

Alas, well before Solomon penned his love poems, the Bible begins with the story of Creation in the Garden of Eden. Some biblical scholars believe that the Tree of Knowledge was actually a fig, not an apple. That would make for some terrific poetic justice when Adam and Eve partake of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. God, displeased with their disobedience, banishes them, clad only in fig leaves. So, the tree whose fruit contained the seeds of knowledge (and every fig has lots of seeds) provided a most-fitting outfit for the well-dressed exile.

Then, in a truly O. Henry plot twist, toward the end of the fifth book of the Bible, God, having experienced humanity's tendency to disobey, promises the Jews wandering in the desert "... a land of wheat and barley, vine, fig, and pomegranate, a land of olives, oil and honey ..." if they obey His commandments (Deuteronomy (8:8-10)). So, in two stories that provide perfect bookends, God metes out punishment with the leaves of the fig tree, whereas in the other, God rewards those who obey the laws with the lush fruit in the Promised Land.

Until one sunny September day in the Upper Galilee, the only figs I had ever seen growing up were the ones that came from the supermarket tied in string and wrapped in cellophane. They were sweet and tasty — with the texture of shoe leather. I had never known the sweet, soft and sensuous ambrosia that was a fresh fig. No wonder the Bible extols this fruit. To pluck a fig from one's own tree must indeed be Eden.

Ficus carica, the common fig, originated in northern Asia Minor, and they are one of the first plants cultivated by humans, preceding even wheat and barley. In fact, fossils found in a Neolithic village just north of ancient Jericho provide evidence of their cultivation dating back to 9400 BCE. Since then, they've spread from Afghanistan to India, where the banyan tree is sacred, and from Portugal to the New World.

Figs were common among both Greeks, for whom the fig was a symbol of the fall harvest, and Romans, who considered the fruit a gift from Bacchus. Aristotle, Theophrastus and Pliny, from the 4th century BCE to the 1st century CE, all described the exacting process of pollination, and Cato the Elder chronicled several varieties of figs in his *De Agri Cultura*.

But as wonderful as figs are, they can lure unsuspecting folks to their death. Livia, wife of the Roman Emperor Augustus, is thought to have killed her hus-



ABOVE: A light salad with Mission figs, blue cheese and almond slivers; TOP: Dried and fresh figs can be used in sweet as well as savory dishes.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTINE PETERSON/TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

band with figs from his garden that she smeared with poison. FYI: Roman gardens often feature the fig variety *Liviana*. Why they would name the tree after a murderer is a question for another time.

Figs first came to the United States

with Spanish missionaries, where they quickly became popular as Southern dooryard trees. Then in 1769, Father Junipero Serra came to California to establish a mission in San Diego, he planted figs. Hence, their name, Mission figs. He wasn't the only one interested in the

scrumptious fruit. Along with their quest for riches during the Gold Rush, American settlers brought a wide variety of fig trees and planted them throughout the newly established state. Figs became a commercial crop in 1900, and California is still the only state to grow them commercially, exporting about 30 million pounds a year.

Unless you live in or very near to California, most of the fruit you will find in stores is dried, as ripe figs are just too soft to travel far. However, because many varieties of figs, such as Black Mission, Brown Turkey, and Kadota, are self-pollinating, you can try your hand at growing your own. In fact, for the past 10 years or so, I've had a Black Mission fig growing in my sunroom. The three-trunked tree produces two or three crops of the fruit every year. But recently I learned that this gem can also grow outdoors in Central Mass., with precautions. So, this spring I lugged my potted tree out to the backyard in the hope that it will grow large and more productive.

Having said all that, the Mission fig is not my favorite; it's just too cloying for my taste. Out of all the varieties of this fruit, my favorite has to be the Calimyrna, a California descendant of the Mediterranean Smyrna. It's tough and chewy on the outside, luscious and not too sweet on the inside. Alas, that variety will not grow in my sunroom.

The Calimyrna's complicated cultivation is accomplished through a process called caprification, named for the original native caprifig tree that, ironically, produces inedible fruit. Rather, the caprifig is used exclusively to pollinate other edible figs.

But first, a proviso. As much as I refer to figs as fruit, they are technically not fruit at all but inverted flowers that contain more than 1,000 seeds each. Pollination works as follows: Caprifigs have fleshy, hollow receptacles called syconia that contain both fig wasps and pollen-bearing male flowers. Tiny adult female fig wasps emerge from the caprifigs and enter the Calimyrna or similar figs, seeking egg-laying sites. But in the process of migrating, they carry pollen from the male flowers on their bodies, which then spreads to female flowers. Thus, pollination and fruit, er, flower production.

Complicated for sure, but ancient farmers were observant enough of the process to place branches of the caprifig tree near the trees they wanted to cultivate.

So how did the Calimyrna fig come to be? The Smyrna fig made its way to America in 1880 when an entrepreneur

Pressed Fig Cake

Serves 12-16

The Biblical story of Abigail and David may be one of the earliest examples of the adage, "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach." According to 1 Samuel (Ch. 25), Nabal is a rich but crude and greedy man. David, hiding from the vengeful King Saul, is living in the wilderness of Paran, providing protection to various landowners' flocks of sheep. David sends a small group of men to Nabal to request provisions, reminding Nabal that David has been protecting his sheep. Nabal responds by insulting him and his men and refusing to hand over any goods. Nabal's wife, fearing what will happen to her people if David decides to wreak revenge, takes matters into her own hands. Without telling her husband, she prepares plentiful provisions for David, among them "pressed fig cakes." David decides not to attack the village. When Abigail tells Nabal what she has done, he suffers a heart attack and dies. David sees this death as God's punishment. He then marries Abigail.

Those fig cakes must have been really good to have swayed David back in the day, and they are still popular today. While you can certainly find them in upscale wine and cheese shops, you can easily make your own. The delicacy that Abigail delivered to David may not have followed this recipe exactly, but your family and friends should feel like royalty when eating this sweet, spicy and fragrant combination of chewy and crunchy textures. It slices easily and pairs beautifully with fresh goat cheese, blue cheese or even cheddar. This dish will add a touch of sophistication to your dessert service but is super easy to prepare. What's not to love?

Ingredients:

2 lb. dried figs, stems removed

¼ c. brandy

1 c. blanched and skinned almonds

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

¼ teaspoon ground ginger

Zest of 1 lemon

¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Directions:

In a food processor fitted with the slicing blade, process the almonds. Set aside.



Change to the chopping blade and grind the figs with the cinnamon, ginger, lemon zest, pepper, and brandy.

Mix all ingredients together.

Divide into four sections and roll each one into a 6-inch long log.

Place the logs onto a pan that has been lined with wax or parchment paper.

Allow the cake to dry for a day and then wrap tightly in plastic wrap. Cut into ½-inch slices and serve on a board with a selection of cheeses.

by the name of G.P. Rixford brought the first verified cuttings of the fig tree to the port of San Francisco. Only 200 survived the crossing from Turkey but they were sufficient to start the process. Botanists George Christian Roeding and W.T. Swingle then went to work, their goal to produce a fig that would grow in California. To accomplish the task, they

imported fig wasps from Turkey. Ten long years later, they found success and dubbed the resulting fig Calimyrna.

Due to exacting climate and soil conditions, commercial Calimyrna cultivation has remained on the Left Coast, but we can purchase these and other varieties of fig right here in Central Mass. ■