

The next full moon is out in June.
 Look at the sky — Strawberry Moon!
 We'll pick some fruit piled oh so high,
 And with it we will bake a pie.

From "Once in a Full Moon," a children's picture book

STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER

Summer is the time for sweet, locally-grown fruits

By Carol Goodman Kaufman

Summertime and the livin' is easy. The late-setting sun allows us to extend hot, bright days into balmy evenings in the backyard, where the clacks of croquet mallets striking wooden balls and the whoosh of badminton rackets compete with the chirps of crickets.

Aside from the opportunity to spend time out of doors, jacket- and mittens-free, perhaps the best part of summer is the abundance of locally grown fruits to be had. And the strawberry, among the first fruit to ripen in the Northeast, is king among them.

And we grow lots of them. Good thing, because strawberries rank at number five on our fruit consumption hit parade. According to the University of Vermont, the United States alone harvests nearly 3 billion pounds of strawberries each year, third among fruits in their contribution to U.S. agriculture. While we in the

Northeast can't claim a large chunk of the market (over half of them come from California), strawberries are an important part of our agricultural economy. Massachusetts alone has 195 farms covering almost 350 acres stretching from the Berkshires to Cape Cod.

It's also a good thing we like the red berry so much, because among its benefits include antioxidants, folate, potassium, vitamin C and fiber.

Global origins

A distinctive fact about strawberries is that their origins are global. Unlike potatoes that come from the Andes, or tomatoes from Mesoamerica, wild strawberries have been picked by people around the world for millennia. But in ancient times, they were not the big and sweet fruit we know today. No, they were small, hard and probably flavorless.

GETTY IMAGES



The United States harvests nearly 3 billion pounds of strawberries each year, and Massachusetts alone has 195 farms covering almost 350 acres stretching from the Berkshires to Cape Cod. PROVIDED BY FILIP FILIPOVIC

But they *were* pretty. Pretty enough to be exalted in poetry. In fact, way back in the first century BCE, the Roman poet Virgil mentioned strawberries three times in his "Eclogues," and Ovid wrote of them twice in his "Metamorphoses."

The strawberry as we know it today is the result of hundreds of years of hybridizing work by plant scientists. In the 14th century the French began cultivating strawberries after plucking one wild variety, *fragaria vesca*, and transplanting it to the garden. Two centuries later, Europeans were growing another variety at home, the *fragaria moschata*. In the 1600s an American variety, the *fragaria virginiana*, or Virginia strawberry, arrived in Europe. Although it didn't immediately become popular (it took another two centuries for that to happen), that berry became the foundation of what we enjoy today. (Stay tuned.)

The strawberry's story wouldn't be complete without an element of intrigue, and this tale certainly has one. It began in 1712 when King Louis XIV sent French Army Intelligence Corps engineer Amédée-François Frézier to Chile. His mission: To reconnoiter that country's military defenses. While there, Frézier also spent time surveying the local plant life. While out on one of his forays, he discovered fields of *fragaria chilensis*, a variety of strawberry that indigenous peoples had been cultivating for a millennium. Scholars believe its seeds arrived in Chile with birds flying from the coast of California.

'Less delicious of taste'

Now, this Chilean berry had what the European botanists had been seeking

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for centuries: size. As Frézier reported to his superiors, “The fruit is generally as big as a walnut, and sometimes as a hen’s egg.” But he added, “and somewhat less delicious of taste than our wood strawberries.”

“Less delicious of taste” didn’t stop Frézier. He packed up samples of his discovery and brought them home. Unfortunately, *fragaria chiloensis* was not hardy. Worse, it was difficult to grow away from the Pacific coast, where it had enjoyed an even, temperate climate.

French botanists took up the challenge to make a hardy, tasty berry by crossing the Chilean variety with the North American Virginia berry. They achieved success, and that hybrid, the *fragaria ananass*, is the source of the berries we use today in our shortcake and ice cream. But the English take credit for much of the hybridizing work done to make our modern berry the delicious fruit it is. According to the French botanist Antoine Nicolas Duchesne, strawberries in the late 18th, early 19th centuries tasted like pineapple. So, he anointed them *fragaria ananass*, “*ananass*” being the Latin word for pineapple.

Around the same time, the English got into the act. Their botanists, in the quest to produce bigger, sweeter and hardier varieties of the berry, successfully cultivated almost 30 different varieties of berry — all from seed.

As a fun historical sidenote, Frézier’s surname is derived from the French word for strawberry, “*fraise*.” It turns out that in the year 916 CE, his ancestor presented King Robert I with a gift of strawberries. As a reward, the king dubbed him a knight and gave him the name Frézier. Now that is a berry different family legacy!

Around the same time Duchesne was tasting pineapple in his French berries, nurseryman Charles Hovey was tinkering with strawberries in Cambridge — our Cambridge, not England’s — and in 1834, he developed his Hovey berry, the progenitor of most modern berries. Then a few years later, one James Wilson went further in developing his Wilson strawberry, a firmer and hardier one capable of growing in many types of soil. Wilson’s innovations helped the berry become a major crop, now growing on 100,000 acres across North America.

‘The flavor endures as a favorite’

Sweet strawberries picked fresh and eaten out of hand are divine. But there’s so much more you can do with them, and for centuries cooks have been flex-



Strawberries at Blake’s Family of Farms in Armada and Almont, Michigan.

PROVIDED BY BLAKE’S FAMILY OF FARMS

ing their creative muscles. In fact, strawberries and cream has been a summertime dessert since the first Tudor king, Henry VII, enjoyed it back in the 16th century. But we Americans always go further. According to the International Dairy Foods Association, it was first lady Dolley Madison who invented strawberry ice cream in 1812. She had it served at the White House in honor of her husband James’s second inauguration. The flavor endures as a favorite, and takes eighth place on our Top 10 list of ice cream flavors in the U.S.

Dolley wasn’t the only first lady who liked her berries. Historian Barbara Brackman writes that Mary Todd Lincoln loved the berry so much that she hosted strawberry parties, both before and during her residency in the White House. In fact, in the early days of the Civil War in 1861, she even went so far to wear a dress made of strawberry-adorned fabric. That dress now resides in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, presumably without any ice cream stains.

So, whether you pick them at a farm or buy them at a store or farmers market, don’t let the summer go by without partaking of the strawberry. Whether fresh or baked into a pastry, it is truly this season’s gift. ■

Strawberry Rhubarb Crisp

Serves 6 to 8.

If you’re looking for a delicious summer dessert that incorporates strawberries while also using up some of the rhubarb growing in the backyard, this recipe is for you.

For the fruit layer:

½ cup granulated sugar

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

¾ pound rhubarb

2 cups strawberries, sliced

For the topping:

1/3 cup shelled natural pistachios, chopped

½ cup unbleached all-purpose flour

1/2 cup granulated sugar

1/4 cup packed brown sugar

6 tablespoons coconut oil (or butter, if you prefer)

Preheat oven to 375°F. and grease a 2-quart shallow baking dish.

In a bowl stir together sugar and flour.

Trim rhubarb and cut into enough 1/2-inch pieces to measure 2 cups

Add rhubarb and strawberries to sugar mixture, tossing well, and spread mixture in baking dish. Set aside.

Finely chop pistachios.

In a bowl whisk together flour and sugars.

Mix oil into the flour mixture with a fork or pastry blender until it resembles coarse meal.

Add pistachios and mix well.

Squeeze handfuls of topping together and coarsely crumble in chunks over filling.

Bake until crisp and bubbling, about 50 minutes.

Serve warm.