BERRIES

With summer upon us, it is the beautiful berry season. A plethora of delicious berries are now available at New Covent Garden Market (NCGM), both homegrown favourites such as strawberries and raspberries, and more exotic varieties, all of which look beautiful on the plate and make a colourful addition to menus.

Continuing our tutored tasting series, we gave the task of selecting and tasting berries to four up and coming intermediate pâtissière diploma students from Le Cordon Bleu cookery school. The students were guided by chefs Julie Walsh and Matthew Hodgetts who were on hand to advise on all aspects of the pastry section.

The berries were provided by NCGM wholesale distributor Mash Purveyors so the budding chefs could discuss their flavour profiles and share ideas for dishes.

David Swan of Mash Purveyors comments: “Mash champions British berries wherever possible. Recently we have noticed a growing interest among chefs in the more unusual berries and we are now seeing UK farms growing varieties such as red gooseberries which were previously only available from abroad.”

Here, Swan guides us through a selection of berries.

BLACKBERRIES

Properties
A supple, black-coloured berry comprising many individual seed-containing fruits surrounding a cone-shaped core. Wonderfully juicy, they’re good raw and cooked.

Usage
Speckled with sugar and serve with cream, purée and serve to make a coulis for ice cream or to make shebets, fools or sorbets. Bake with chopped apples in a crumble.

Notes
Available end of July through to mid October. Look for plump, shiny, tender berries, with none that are mushy or mouldy.

GOOSEBERRIES

Properties
The size of large grapes, but more spherical. Early in the season they are bright green, with a velvety effect on the skin, and quite hard and tart, best for cooking with. Later on softer, sweeter varieties become available, often yellow or red coloured which are good eaten raw. Some varieties have sparse, thin hairs.

Usage
Earlier, tart varieties are perfect for making the classic English pudding, gooseberry fool. Also good for jams, sauces, crumble, pies, and a tart sauce for rich meats such as pork, goose and mackerel.

Notes
If you’re going to cook with them, look for slightly under ripe – but not too hard – berries. For eating raw, choose berries that yield to the touch, and are juicy.

WHAT THE CHEFS SAID

DAISY MACDONALD – Pâtissière chef and teacher, Le Cordon Bleu

“When I find out we were doing a masterclass on berries my mind went boom – there’s just so much you can do!”

OLIVIA MARJOLAN

“My make a Chambord, elderflower and and blackberry coulis with almond sticks and black pepper foam. The pie was excellent in the jelly as you can see how pretty the berry is, it looks like a reverse strawberry.”

ESTELLE CHEY

“I make a summer berry mousse with the berries and always find strawberries work best fresh in a tart. I love using strawberries as a topping.”

VISHAK CHANDRASKEKAR

“I found the gooseberry very sour in comparison to all the other berries today. It’s probably best cooked and combined with other flavours.”

MATTHEW HODGETT

Pâtissière chef and teacher, Le Cordon Bleu

“When I found out we were doing a masterclass on berries my mind went boom – there’s just so much you can do!”

JULIE WALSH

Head pastry chef, Le Cordon Bleu

“We used blackberry for a summer pudding because it’s sweeter and you need to add less sugar in with the berries, which means you taste more berry.”

RASPBERRIES

Properties
A member of the rose family, raspberries have a wonderful pink, sweet taste. Look for bright, evenly coloured and plump berries, with no mushy or mouldy examples and no stalks attached, which indicates that the berries were unripe when picked.

Usage
Serve with cream or ice cream, use in tarts, trifles and cheesecakes. Also use to make coulis, sauces for game and to flavour white wine vinaigre.

Notes
Available late June to early October. Very short shelf life so use them quickly.

PINEAPPLES

Properties
The pineberry combines the shape and texture of a strawberry with a flavour and smell close to that of a pineapple. White skin with tiny red pips, they look to be the reverse of strawberries.

Usage
Can be used in much the same way as strawberries, but their short season puts them at a premium.

Notes
Grown under glass, pineberries have only a five-week season in the summer.

STRASBERRIES

Properties
The strawberry is a variety of wild strawberry, with a raspberry-like appearance. It is not a hybrid of the two fruits as is often thought. It is similarly soft textured, with characteristics that are similar to raspberries, such as being a deeper red, being rounder and having a bumpy exterior. It is also smaller than a strawberry and has deeper seeds. The fruit has a unique aromatic flavour.

Usage
As with strawberries, delicious on their own or with cream, ice cream or creme fraiche. Use to make a variety of desserts such as pavlova, ice cream, summer fruit pudding, and so on.

Notes
Originally developed in South America in the 1900s, they almost became extinct until they were reintroduced commercially by a Dutch farmer in the 21st century. Short season, from April to June or July.

BLUEBERRIES

Properties
Small, round, smooth-skinned and fleshy with tiny seeds, blueberries have a balanced, tart and sweet flavour.

Usage
Eat raw with cream, add to the mix for muffins, breads and puddings or bake in a pie or tart. Cook in a little water with sugar and some lemon zest to make a topping for baked cheesecake.

Notes
Available end of June to early September. Look for plump, indigo blueberries of a fairly uniform size, with a slight silvery bloom.

STRAWBERRIES

Properties
Arguably the most popular fruit in the world, they are at their best when plump, red and juicy.

Usage
The possibilities are endless; with cream or ice cream or sprinkled with a little balsamic vinegar. Add to fruit salads. Use to make jams, tarts or top puddings and cakes.

Notes
Imports are available all year round, but the British season runs from late May to early September. Strawberries do not store well so need to be eaten quickly and served at room temperature for the best flavour.

CONTACTS

For information on supply, contact Mash Purveyors at New Covent Garden Market on 020 7720 9091, or visit www.mashpurveyors.com

New Covent Garden Market provides 40% of the fruit and vegetables eaten in London restaurants. For more information, or a tour of the market, visit www.newcoventgardenmarket.com

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