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# apricot

ADMIRATION SOCIETIES

THE VERSATILE SUMMER FRUIT PRESENTS  
A COMMON YET UNDERREPRESENTED  
FLAVOR THAT FRESHENS UP ALL  
PARTS OF THE MENU.

BY JODY SHEE





How many fruits offer sweetness and tartness at the same time? It's this flavor combination, found in apricots, that warrants respect not often paid to the fruit on restaurant menus.

The yellow/orange stone fruit has long played a role in the cuisine of far-flung nations. Alexander the Great introduced it to Greece and William Shakespeare wrote of the fruit as an aphrodisiac in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The fruit, especially dried apricots, is closely tied to Persian cuisine and was an important item on Persian trade routes. Of late, apricots have become especially popular in Iran and Egypt; in the U.S., not as much.

But for some creative chefs, this underrepresented fruit fits perfectly into a flavor-layering philosophy, especially for Demetrio Zavala, corporate executive chef for Washington, D.C.-based PRG Hospitality with its two restaurants, Lincoln and Teddy & The Bully Bar. He prepares apricots many ways, and adds them as a surprise flavor to several dishes, including a tomato salad.

For any dish to be memorable, it can't be about one flavor, Zavala says. "You can't put a tomato salad on a plate with olive oil. You have to take it to the next level and add grilled apricot, then take some apricots and smoke and puree them to make a fruit gel. When you enhance it like that, you make it so much better."

In the same vein, he combines a hot and cold element in his grilled apricot/melon salad that begins with a fava bean puree base. He tops it with watermelon and cucumber chunks, which he believes provide a good flavor contrast, then adds a little mint for refreshment. The apricots go on last. He grills them in a wood-burning oven, and before adding them to the salad, roasts them in the oven. The apricots become the surprising warm element in the cold salad.

## EXPERIMENT WITH PREPARATIONS

Apricots embellish flavor in many ways, depending on the preparation method. Joe Cassinelli, founder/president of Alpine Restaurant Group, Inc., Somerville, Mass., operating two restaurants, likes to slow-roast apricots and plums to add to his summer heirloom tomato salad. He slices and seasons apricots with salt, pepper and such herbs as fresh thyme and marjoram, then roasts them at 180°F for 2-3 hours. The end result is a semi-dehydrated fruit that retains some of the characteristics of fresh apricots but the texture of the dried version, concentrating the sweetness and tartness. He alternatively calls the process oven-curing, and it makes the apricots breakable with a fork and not chewy.

At his Italian restaurant, Posto, Cassinelli likes to use the slow-roasted apricots to top bruschetta accompanied with prosciutto, balsamic vinegar and Burrata cheese. Or he might use them as a topping on a Neapolitan pizza along with prosciutto, or add them to salads. The trio of apricots, figs and plums are a favorite of his, "so I combine them whenever possible," he says.

As part of his apricot-grilling preparation, Zavala likes to sweeten them by tossing in simple syrup for caramelization and a honey-like burnt-sugar flavor. Or, he tosses them in maple syrup for a burnt-maple-syrup flavor.

He even likes to smoke apricots in honey for more sweetness, and add them to an arugula and fennel salad with a classic mignonette sauce, all topped with pistachio ice cream. Because the ice cream is made with milk and buttermilk, as it melts with the mignonette sauce, it becomes a nice creamy dressing for the salad, Zavala says.

Added to lemon and pureed, apricots naturally thicken a sauce that goes well with poached fish, to which you can add a citrus olive oil, he says.

## CONSIDER CONDIMENTS AND DRESSINGS

The addition of apricots can turn an average condiment seasonal and memorable. At Departure Restaurant + Lounge, Portland, Ore., executive chef Gregory Gourdet makes an apricot mustard to accompany the chicken and shrimp spring rolls.

Joe Cassinelli, founder/president of Alpine Restaurant Group, Inc., Somerville, Mass., developed Duck Tamal with Slow-cooked Duck Leg, Dried Fig, Cranberry and Apricot Agridulce.





**APRICOT MUSTARD**

*Gregory Gourdet, Executive Chef  
Departure Restaurant + Lounge  
Portland, Ore.*

YIELD: 11 CUPS

- 20 oz. dried apricots
- 3 oz. Shaoxing wine
- 20 oz. tea water
- 3 oz. ginger, peeled, sliced
- 18 oz. honey
- 11 oz. rice wine vinegar
- 6 oz. water
- 7 T. salt
- 10 oz. Dijon mustard

**Method:** Combine dried apricots, Shaoxing wine and tea water; let sit 15 minutes. Puree in Vitamix. In batches, puree together ginger, honey, rice wine vinegar, water, salt and Dijon mustard. Combine the two sets of ingredients.

**SOUNDS LIKE CHRISTMAS COCKTAIL**

*Paul Sauter // Spirit/Cocktail  
Consultant, Coppervine // Head  
Bartender, Mercadito // Chicago*

YIELD: 1 COCKTAIL

- 1 apricot
- 2 oz. Rhine Hall apple brandy
- ¾ oz. fresh lemon juice
- ½ oz. agave nectar
- ½ oz. habanero/cinnamon syrup
- Splash of Sidral apple soda

**Method:** Skin apricot; cut in slices. Cover in pilon (Mexican compacted brown sugar). Roast over applewood chips until golden-brown; cool. In shaker, muddle well 2-3 prepared apricot slices. Add brandy, lemon juice, agave nectar and habanero/cinnamon syrup; shake well. Strain onto fresh ice in Collins glass to about 1 oz. from top. Top off with splash of apple soda. Garnish with skewered grilled apricot slice.

He purees plump dried apricots in rice wine vinegar, Shaoxing wine and honey, then continues to puree, adding Dijon mustard. He tops it off with chili oil and serves it as a dip for the crunchy spring rolls.

The menu at Plan Check Kitchen + Bar, Los Angeles, features apricot and peach ketchup paired with sweet potato fries or served on a burger by request. One day, executive chef Ernesto Uchimura ran a lamb burger special with feta cheese. Apricots were at peak season, so he went to work developing the new ketchup. “I cooked down apricots with sugar, a really nice apple cider vinegar, onions, garlic and a touch of capers for a balance between sweet and sour,” he says. He pureed and strained the mixture a few times for a smooth texture. The result goes well with regular or sweet potato fries.

“People think a fruit element with sweet potato fries might not work,” Uchimura says. “But they are cooked in beef fat with smoked salt for a savory characteristic that works well with sweet.”

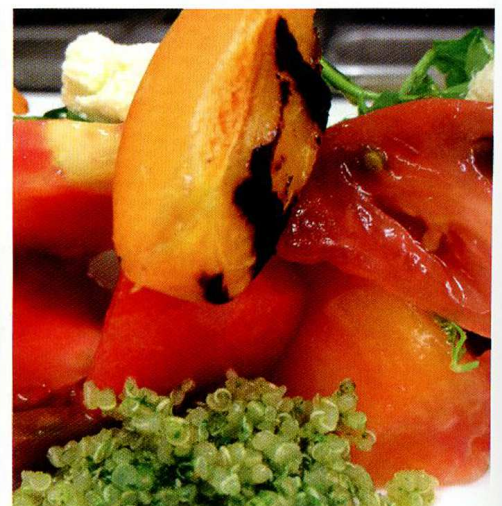
He easily tweaks his apricot ketchup preparation to make chutney. It is simply more chunky and cooked with more onion and garlic, with a flavor similar to compote, he says. “If you mix in vinegar and hold back on the spices, you could make a dessert sauce, similar to a jam. If you know where to go with the flavor, you can redirect it by adding or subtracting ingredients.”

Chris Hessler, corporate chef for the seven restaurants that are part of Kruse & Muer Restaurants, Rochester, Mich., makes apricot/ginger vinaigrette to top his Salmon Apricot Salad, which is so popular that he offers it at each restaurant and can’t take it off the menu. The salad combines grilled salmon with field greens, dried apricots and cherries, chevre cheese and candied walnuts.

To make the vinaigrette, Hessler combines and emulsifies apricot nectar, apricot preserves, pickled ginger and olive oil with lemon juice and apple cider vinegar.

That same vinaigrette goes with his Crispy Pecan Chicken Salad. He deep-fries pecan-crusted chicken, lays it over a bed of mixed lettuce, and tops it with strawberries, apricots, pineapple and goat cheese.

Apricots are the unique ingredient in the almondine sauce Hessler uses to top walleye fish. The sauce combines almonds, butter, herbs and a splash of apricot nectar. To plate, he lays five or six fresh apricot slices down the center of the fish fillet, and tops with the sauce and chopped herbs. He serves it with a colorful harvest pilaf of couscous, green onions, dried cranberries, pecans, quinoa, lentils and fresh corn.



Left: This grilled apricot/melon salad incorporates a fava bean puree base topped with watermelon and cucumber chunks, and grilled and roasted apricots. Right: Grilled apricots are perfect for flavor layering in this tomato salad created by Demetrio Zavala, corporate executive chef for Washington, D.C.-based PRG Hospitality.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ABOVE: COURTESY OF DEPARTURE RESTAURANT + LOUNGE; LEFT: COURTESY OF DEMETRIO ZAVALA; OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: COURTESY OF THE SQUEAKY BEAN; COURTESY OF PLAN CHECK KITCHEN + BAR.



He also makes a white wine reduction featuring peach nectar, apricot preserves, cream and butter for a buttery apricot sauce to serve with coconut-crusted flounder. “You could call it apricot beurre blanc,” he says.

## BOTTOMS UP WITH APRICOTS

Consider the ways to freshen bar drinks with the summer fruit. Brian Smith, bar manager at The Squeaky Bean, Denver, infuses the housemade Rock & Rye with dried apricot, along with orange and lemon peel, horehound, clove, cinnamon, cardamom and rock candy. The trick is to extract the oils from the ingredients and infuse it into the whiskey.

To accomplish this, Smith combines the rye whiskey with all the ingredients except the rock candy in an iSi whipped cream charger, and charges it with nitrous oxide to perform cavitation. “The pressurization puts gas into the liquid and into the solids,” he says. “The dried apricots have cellular walls. The gas will permeate the cells exposed to the liquid. When you discharge it, the gas tries to escape and pulls all the oil with it.”

After he charges the ingredients in the container, he shakes it to help the gas interact with the solids, and lets it sit a few minutes. Then he discharges it, strains the liquid through a fine strainer and adds melted rock candy.

The old way of accomplishing what he does with this drink is to hang strands of spice-coated rock candy in a jar of rye whiskey. “Nitrogen cavitation takes a very old way of changing the character of a spirit, which is what cocktails are all about, and turning it on its head using a modern technique,” Smith says.

The result is a take on the classic old fashioned—a combination of sugar and bitters. “The apricot in there brings a nice almond bitterness and nutty aromatic to the cocktail, as well as giving it a certain fruitiness and mid-palate rich sweetness,” he says.

For summer, Smith plans to use apricot pits to make amaretto, which typically is made from apricot pits and almonds. He turns the pits to powder by dehydrating them and putting them in a liquid nitrogen bath to get them so cold they turn brittle, then processes them in a Robot Coupe. He combines the resulting powder with a neutral-grain spirit such as Everclear and sweetens it with orgeat syrup, which is made with almonds.

He also uses the extract he makes with spirits and apricot pits as the base for his stone fruit bitters. “It gives an aromatic bitterness you can’t get without the essential oils of the pit of stone fruit,” Smith says. ■



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Top: The Squeaky Bean, Denver, infuses the housemade Rock & Rye with dried apricot. Bottom: The menu at Plan Check Kitchen + Bar, Los Angeles, features apricot and peach ketchup paired with regular or sweet potato fries.