

Nature's sweet treat

Turkish black Bursa figs



© GORDON BELL / SHUTTERSTOCK

BY VICKI SHANTA RETELNY

BLACK BURSA FIGS are among the most prized variety of figs in the world. Grown and hand-picked for thousands of years by small family growers in 15 villages around the province of Bursa in Turkey, they're highly sought after for a number of reasons.

"With the support of Mother Nature and being touched by the sun of the Mediterranean, the black Bursa fig is known for its large size and its sweetness," explains Belit Balci, deputy managing director of Alara Agri Business, a member of The Fruit Farm Group, one of the largest exporters of fresh figs in the world.

These black beauties, which are actually deep purple in colour, are typically available at Costco from late August through mid-October, depending on the growing and weather conditions. Despite its short season, Balci explains, the black Bursa variety has gained a worldwide reputation, as it travels well. Quality is key with fresh figs, and Alara purchases figs from villages that meet specific quality specifications under the supervision of a dedicated team. Alara processes 100 tons of figs per day and employs 350 workers per day during the fig season to work on the two most sophisticated fig-packing lines in the world.

"Turkish figs are very popular at Costco. Members look forward to the fresh fig season commencing each year, as it's the sweetest fig variety. They come in boxes of 10 to 12 each," says Rachel Kalb, assistant produce buyer at Costco.

This luscious ancient fruit does your body good by offering a good dose of fibre, vitamin A, potassium and calcium. Because the figs ripen at different times over a 40- to 50-day period, they are hand-picked several times during the season.

The black Bursa fig is unusual when it comes to its delicate reproductive nature. Balci explains that

the black Bursa fig tree is one of the only fruit trees that doesn't depend on bees for pollination; instead, it relies on *Blastophaga psenes*, a fig wasp.

Preparation

There is no need to wash Bursa figs. Just gently wipe their skins with a damp cloth and trim off the hard stem. Leave them whole (with skin on) or slice from top to bottom in half or smaller pieces. For the best flavour, serve figs at room temperature; remove them from the refrigerator at least an hour before eating.

Bursa figs can be eaten raw, drizzled with honey or in salads, or sautéed, grilled, roasted or poached. Since they are sweeter than other figs, Bursa figs are great in desserts: you can add slices to plain yogurt or mascarpone; use them as a topping on cake or tarts; or add pureed figs to brownie, muffin or cake batter for natural sweetness. For a savoury and sweet taste, top flatbreads with a drizzle of olive oil, Parmesan, rocket, onions and figs (see recipe).

Purchase

The best figs are plump and soft. Avoid figs with bruises, splits or a sour smell, as this indicates that they are past their prime.

Storage

Under-ripe figs can be stored on the countertop to speed up ripening. Store ripe figs in the refrigerator individually wrapped in parchment paper or in the box they came in. Figs spoil quickly, so eat within two to three days of purchase.

Although the heritage of the black Bursa fig dates back thousands of years, this delicate fruit remains in today's culinary limelight. Its intense sweetness, gentle aroma and smooth texture make it a desired fruit in kitchens worldwide. **C**

TURKISH BURSA FIG FLATBREAD

212 g (7.5 ounces) flatbread
30 ml (2 tablespoons) sunflower oil
1 large red onion, sliced thinly
6 Bursa figs, halved
3 garlic cloves, crushed
67 g (½ cup) Kalamata olives, pitted
and coarsely chopped
75 g (1 cup) rocket, rinsed
25 g (¼ cup) crumbled feta cheese
Preheat oven to 220 C/gas mark
7/425 F.

Brush flatbread with 15 ml (1 tablespoon) of the oil. For crisp flatbread, place directly on oven rack (for chewy-textured flatbread place on a sheet pan) and bake for 3 minutes. Remove from oven and set aside.

On the hob over medium heat, add the other 15 ml (1 tablespoon) of oil to a medium-sized pan. Heat for a minute and then add onion. Sauté for 5 to 10 minutes until onions brown and caramelise. Add figs and garlic and heat for another minute. Remove from heat and spoon onto flatbread(s).

Top with olives, rocket and cheese. Cut into 4 equal pieces. Makes 4 servings.

Recipe by Vicki Shanta Retelny.

THE COSTCO CONNECTION

Turkish Bursa figs are available in the produce section of most Costco warehouses.

Vicki Shanta Retelny is *The Lifestyle Nutritionist* and author of *Total Body Diet for Dummies*. She blogs at SimpleCravingsRealFood.com.