

## **FEATURED INGREDIENT: STRAWBERRIES**

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photo: Love + Craft Kitchen

Brightly colored, aromatic and sweet, strawberries are one of the most popular fruits available. They've been enjoyed for centuries, first picked in the wild for medicinal use in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, then later grown in gardens in Brittany, France in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Strawberries are not only appealing to the eye and palate, but do a great deal of good for our health. They are rich in fiber and an excellent source of vitamins A, C, E, and B-complex, several minerals and antioxidants. These nutrients help reduce inflammation, cholesterol, blood pressure and spikes in insulin levels.

Strawberries are easy to find year-round in grocery stores and are considered in season from spring to early fall. There are hundreds of varieties of strawberry plants, with the three most commonly known being June Bearing, Everbearing and Day-Neutral. June Bearing produce fruit in one short spring and early summer cycle. Everbearing produce fruit in three separate cycles - spring, summer and fall. Day-Neutral bear fruit continuously for about five months, summer through fall.

For more in-depth information on how to grow, pick, store, and use strawberries, as well as their health benefits, check out [StrawberryPlants.org](http://StrawberryPlants.org). Along with a good deal of free information, they offer a Master Growing Manual for sale.

### **SELECTION AND STORAGE**

Most people agree that fresh strawberries are best when they are in season. Check local grocers, farmers markets or pick-your-own farms during the spring and summer months for the most flavorful options. It's fairly simple to select good quality strawberries:

- choose those that are uniformly red
- avoid those with signs of mold or soft spots

When purchasing a package of strawberries, remove any that are damaged before storing. Wait to wash the berries until you are ready to use them so that they do not absorb extra moisture and form mold. Once washed, allow them to dry in a single layer on paper or cloth towels.

Store fresh berries in the coldest part of your refrigerator, like the vegetable crisper or the back area of middle and lower shelves. Strawberries will keep in the refrigerator for up to one week, and may be best when used within three days.

Can't use all of your fresh strawberries right away? They freeze extremely well. Simply place the berries on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper and freeze for at least one hour. Transfer the partially frozen berries to a zip-lock freezer bag and place the bag back into the freezer for later use.

### **USE**

Other than enjoying strawberries on their own, fresh, frozen or dried strawberries can be used in a multitude of ways. Try using them in -

- jam or preserves
- baking and desserts
- confections
- sauces or compotes
- syrups
- vegetable and fruit salads
- smoothies and beverages
- entrees such as pork, chicken or fish

Strawberries pair well with -

- other fruits such as berries, citrus, rhubarb, watermelon and other melons
- herbs and spices such as basil, thyme, cinnamon, nutmeg, black pepper, vanilla
- dairy such as sour cream, yogurt, cottage cheese, ricotta, mascarpone
- dark chocolate, balsamic vinegar, nuts and nut butters
- fermented and distilled beverages such as Champagne, Amaretto, Kirsch and Grand Marnier

### **FUN FACTS**

People across the world love strawberries! Here are just a few ways in which they are enjoyed in other countries.

- In France, strawberries are served with cheese, and in desserts, pastries and crepes.
- Those attending the Wimbledon tennis tournament in the United Kingdom oftentimes enjoy the popular dessert called Strawberries and Cream.
- In Mexico, Strawberries and Cream is also a common snack found in ice cream parlors.
- Italy uses strawberries in a variety of desserts, sauces and gelato.
- Japan grows a large amount of strawberries and uses them in desserts, confections, sandwiches and crepes.
- In Greece, strawberries are made into a liqueur, or are sprinkled with sugar and drizzled with Metaxa brandy as a component of a cheesecake, pudding or other dessert.
- On St. John's Day in Sweden, strawberries are a traditionally consumed plain or in desserts such as strawberry-rhubarb pie or strawberry shortcake.