

Now is the Time to Try a Pluot

By Suzanne Carreiro

If you haven't discovered pluots—a cross between a plum and an apricot—do it now. This extremely addictive, juicy fruit is plentiful and reasonably priced from now through September at the St. Helena Farmers' Market. If you are already a pluot fan, you've seen the dozen or so varieties—Dapple Dandy, Flavor King, Flavor Queen, Flavor Gem—come and go at the Market. Each week, different varieties arrive, as one type comes into season and another goes out—so to try them all you have to buy them weekly.

Pluots, a relatively new fruit created and trademarked by Floyd Zaiger of California, have the plum's thin, smooth skin and the apricot's firmer flesh but they have a more complex, sweeter flavor profile than either of their parents. The often mottled skin hides the fruit's beautiful interior that varies in color from yellow to pink to bright fuchsia.

I prefer to buy pluots—and eat them—when they are firm, with just a tiny bit of give when gently squeezed. If they are hard, ripen them in a paper bag at room temperature. Once they are ripe, refrigerate them. Although I mostly eat pluots out-of-hand, they are also good in recipes—frangipane tart, cobbler, and ice cream. Here's a recipe for pluot ice cream. The recipe calls for ground cardamom but you can substitute a

teaspoon of vanilla extract, adding it at the end with the fruit, if you prefer. You can use either pluots or plums, which you'll find at Bera Ranch, Hamada Farms, and Neufeld Farms at the St. Helena Farmers' Market—and be sure to look for the honey at Marshall's Farm stand.

Honey-Pluot Ice Cream

Yield: about 6 cups

6 ripe pluots or plums, pitted and quartered

1/3 cup sugar

3/4 teaspoon ground cardamom

2 cups heavy cream

1 cup whole milk

3 large eggs

1/2 cup honey

1. Puree the pluots in a food processor until smooth; set aside. Stir together the sugar and cardamom; pour into a medium saucepan. Add the cream and milk; heat over medium heat, stirring frequently, until scalding hot, but not boiling. Remove from the heat.

2. Combine the eggs and honey in a large bowl; whisk until smooth. To temper the eggs (to help prevent curdling), gradually whisk about 1/2 of the hot cream mixture into the bowl of eggs. Slowly pour the tempered eggs into the saucepan with the remaining hot cream mixture, whisking the cream mixture constantly. Cook over low heat, stirring constantly, until the mixture coats the back of a wooden spoon. Watch carefully to avoid curdling the eggs.
3. Remove from the heat; stir in the reserved plums. Place a fine sieve over a large bowl; immediately pour the cream-plum mixture through the sieve. Put several cups of ice into a large bowl (large enough to accommodate the bowl of hot cream-plums); add several cups of cold water. Place the bowl of hot cream into the ice bath to rapidly chill the mixture, stirring frequently. When cool, cover and refrigerate until well chilled, preferably overnight
4. Freeze the cream-plum mixture in an ice cream freezer according to the manufacturer's directions.

Bring a friend to the Market this week. The Market offers a great selection of just-picked fruits and vegetables, olive oil, delicious baked goods, hand-made crafts, and plenty of fresh hot and cold dishes. The St. Helena Farmers' Market is held Friday mornings from 7:30 until noon

through the end of October. The Market is located at Crane Park on South Crane Avenue, 500 feet south of Grayson.

Suzanne Carreiro, a St. Helena Farmers' Market board member, is writing a cookbook on Umbrian cuisine that will be available in late 2009.