

COOKING

A fruit that's better than chocolate?

Forget ganache — he'd rather create luscious desserts rich with prunes.

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Special to The Times

“YOU'RE so lucky — you live in Paris!” I hear that a lot from people. I guess they're assuming life here is a nonstop parade of chic Parisians and exquisite chocolates. It's as if I said to folks living in Los Angeles, “You're so lucky — you live in Los Angeles,” jealous of being surrounded by all those movie stars and taco stands. For the record: I'm not all that keen on hobnobbing with stars, but I'd kill to find a taco truck in Paris.

Cultural quirks notwithstanding, making up for the lack of Hollywood stars are the rows of delicious chocolates and fine pastries lined up at the pâtisseries on every block — OK, maybe I do stake out some of the pastry shops, paparazzi-like.

And like the locals, I'm star-struck by prunes: custardy wedges of Far Breton, studded with flambéed prunes, which Parisians enjoy as *le snack* in the afternoon, or scoops of Agenais ice cream, made with Armagnac-macerated prunes, at famed ice cream shop Berthillon on the Ile St.-Louis.

Almost 95% of the prunes cultivated in France are *pruneaux d'Agen*, from plums grown near the [See Prunes, Page F2] town of Agen, which borders Gascony, in the southwest. They're terrific, but worth

searching out in Paris are the *pruneaux mi-cuit*. (I get mine at my twice-weekly neighborhood market, although specialty stores carry them as well.)

Biting into a *pruneau mi-cuit* is a transformative experience. They're prunes that are only half-dried, so they've retained much of their moisture and are pillowy-plump with a thin, glossy-black skin. They're better than candy.

The chocolate and spicy flavors of these fat fruits are so luscious that I'd pit a good prune against any of those fancy little squares of ganache in the swank chocolate boutiques around here.

California provides 80% of the world's prunes. And California's prunes are made with plums that were grafted by a Frenchman in the 1850s from a plum cultivated in France: *les prunes d'Ente*. Thanks to this successful Franco-American alliance, good prunes are available on both sides of the Atlantic.

A typical café dessert here might be a bowl of poached prunes. I perk mine up at home with rounds of tangy glazed kumquats. Their citrus-like bite is the perfect foil for the richness of the prunes, gently poached in Earl Grey tea.

The French rarely serve prunes that have been pitted because it's believed that the *noyau* (the kernel in the pit) helps flavor the prunes as they cook. I'm not sure I'm convinced of that, but it does

help them keep their shape.

Prunes go especially well with Armagnac, the dark-amber spirit made in the same region. I've had the good fortune of shopping at outdoor markets in rural Gascony where exceptionally good bottles of Armagnac are sold on makeshift folding tables, some of which obviously do double-duty the rest of the week as ironing boards.

Macerating the prunes in Armagnac is the base for a prune-Armagnac ice cream. I'm pretty generous with the Armagnac, perhaps because it stands up better to the dousing of dark chocolate sauce I give it at home. Prunes don't shrivel when paired with strong flavors such as Armagnac and chocolate, and in fact, are perfect partners.

And perhaps I've been living around the French for too long, because I can't resist making foreign foods distinctly my own, like the French are prone to (which explains melted cheese served alongside *les sushis*).

Although I've seen prunes in some odd places, from canned tuna to the plastic replica on the end of my key chain (yes, really!), I'm inclined to put *les pruneaux* between layers of fluffy mascarpone and shaved dark chocolate — a sensible spin on the classic tiramisu.

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David Lebovitz's blog, *Living the Sweet Life in Paris*, is at www.davidlebovitz.com.



BOB CHAMBERLIN *Los Angeles Times*

THE SCOOP: *Prune-Armagnac ice cream has intense flavor.*



Photographs by BOB CHAMBERLIN *Los Angeles Times*

PAIRED: *Prune and chocolate tiramisu. Prunes partner well with chocolate's strong flavor.*

Prune-Armagnac ice cream

Total time: 15 minutes, plus overnight macerating and freezing time

Servings: 8

Note: Adapted from "The Perfect Scoop" by David Lebovitz. This is best when assembled a day or more ahead. It can be made up to 3 days in advance. Feel free to let the prunes macerate in the Armagnac a few days ahead.

- 5 ounces pitted prunes, quartered
- 6 tablespoons Armagnac
- 7 tablespoons sugar, divided
- 1 cup sour cream
- 1 1/2 cups milk
- 1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

1. Place the quartered prunes in a small saucepan with the Armagnac and 1 tablespoon of sugar. Heat over medium-low heat just until

the Armagnac starts to bubble. Remove from the heat, cover and let stand at least 2 hours. (The prunes can be macerated a few days in advance— refrigerate the prunes and Armagnac in a covered container or sealable plastic bag with the air removed.)

2. To make the ice cream, purée the prunes and their liquid in a food processor along with the sour cream, milk, the remaining 6 tablespoons sugar, lemon juice, vanilla and salt. Pulse the mixture until it's almost smooth, but leave a few little bits of prunes remaining.

3. Chill the mixture in the refrigerator for about an hour, then freeze in your ice cream maker according to the manufacturer's instructions. Makes about 1 quart.

Each serving: 199 calories; 3 grams protein; 26 grams carbohydrates; 1 gram fiber; 8 grams fat; 5 grams saturated fat; 17 mg. cholesterol; 34 mg. sodium.

Prune and chocolate tiramisu

Total time: About 1 hour, plus overnight chilling

Servings: 12 to 16

Note: You can grate the chocolate with a metal rasp-type zester or use the grating disk on a food processor.

- 12 ounces pitted prunes
- 1/4 cup plus 1/3 cup sugar, divided
- 1/4 teaspoon almond extract
- 2 cups mascarpone cheese
- 1 1/2 cups heavy cream
- 1 cup espresso (or very strong coffee)
- 1/2 cup amaretto liqueur

- 1/2 cup brandy
- 6 ounces bittersweet or semi-sweet chocolate, finely grated
- 12 ounces ladyfingers

1. For the prune filling: In a medium saucepan, combine the prunes with one-fourth cup sugar and 1 1/4 cups water. Bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to a gentle simmer and cook for 10 minutes. Remove from the heat and allow the prunes to cool in the liquid. Add the almond extract. Purée the mixture in a food processor or blender, or using an immersion blender. Set aside.

2. For the mascarpone cream: In the bowl of a stand mixer or in a medium bowl with a hand mixer, whip the mascarpone with the heavy cream just until the mixture begins to hold its shape. Add the remaining one-third cup sugar and whip until soft and creamy, but not stiff, about 2 minutes. Set aside.

3. In a small bowl, mix together the espresso, amaretto and brandy, then set aside.

4. Spread one-third of the mascarpone cream in the bottom of a 2-quart rectangular baking dish. Sprinkle one-third of the grated

chocolate evenly over the cream.

5. Dunk each ladyfinger in the espresso mixture, making sure they're submerged long enough to be thoroughly saturated. (Tear into one to make sure.) Create the first layer of the well-soaked ladyfingers, placing them snugly against one another.

6. Spoon the prune filling over the ladyfingers and spread evenly.

7. Spread half of the remaining mascarpone cream over the prune filling and sprinkle with half of the remaining ground chocolate.

8. Make another layer of ladyfingers, following the instructions in Step 5. If you run low on the espresso mixture, add more espresso to soak the ladyfingers.

9. Cover the ladyfingers with the remaining mascarpone cream, then lightly sprinkle evenly with the remaining ground chocolate. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 8 hours or overnight before serving.

Each of 16 servings: 455 calories; 6 g. protein, 43 grams carbohydrates; 2 grams fiber; 28 grams fat; 15 grams saturated fat; 145 mg. cholesterol; 59 mg. sodium.

Earl Grey tea-poached prunes with glazed kumquats

Total time: 50 minutes

Servings: 4

Note: Fruity black currant tea is also wonderful with prunes. You may use pitted or unpitted prunes. If kumquats aren't available, fresh orange segments are an equally good counterpoint to the prunes. Serve with a dollop of crème fraîche and some crisp cookies.

- 1/2 cup sugar, divided
- 2 bags of Earl Grey tea, tags removed
- 20 to 25 prunes
- 1 strip of lemon or orange zest, about 1/2-inch-wide and 2 to 3 inches long
- 10 kumquats, sliced and seeded

1. To poach the prunes, combine one-fourth cup of the sugar with 1 cup of water in a small saucepan, add the tea bags and bring to a gentle simmer, stirring so the sugar dissolves. Add the prunes and continue to gently simmer for about 10 minutes until the prunes are tender. If your prunes are large or quite dry, they may take longer. If necessary, add a bit more water to keep them covered.

2. Once the prunes are tender, remove from the heat and allow the mixture to cool to room temperature. Remove the tea bags and gently squeeze them to extract additional flavor before discarding them. Set aside the prunes (with



their liquid).

3. To glaze the kumquats, bring 1 cup of water, the remaining one-fourth cup sugar and the kumquats to a boil in a small saucepan.

4. Reduce the heat to a gentle boil and cook for about 10 minutes, keeping an eye on them during the last few minutes as the liquid reduces and becomes syrupy. Cool to room temperature.

5. Serve the prunes with a bit of their liquid in deep soup plates, with kumquats strewn over the top.

Each serving: 241 calories; 2 grams protein; 62 grams carbohydrates; 6 grams fiber; 1 gram fat; 0 saturated fat; 0 cholesterol; 6 mg. sodium.

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