

Amarone-poached figs with ricotta

Cooking time: 20 mins

Ingredients:

pine nuts

extra-virgin olive oil

3-5 ripe, purple figs per person, depending on their size

Amarone, or any other good, strong Italian red wine

white sugar

fresh ricotta

salt and pepper



Method:

1. Gently fry pine nuts in a little olive oil until golden but not burnt. Place on kitchen paper and mix with some salt. You will need enough for each serving to have a generous garnish of pine nuts.
2. Choose a small saucepan (with lid) in which figs can stand upright nestled against each other. Add enough wine to come approx one third the way up the figs. Remove the figs and put to one side. Then measure the quantity of wine you have used. Put the wine back in the pan and add 1 tbsp sugar for every 75ml of wine. Heat the pan until the sugar has dissolved.
3. Replace the figs, cover and simmer gently for 10 mins. The figs will look more attractive on the plate if you leave the stalks on. If any refuse to stand up, cut a very thin slice off the bottom to create a flat resting surface.
4. Meanwhile place a dollop of ricotta on each serving plate, season with a small amount of freshly ground black pepper and garnish with pine nuts.
5. When the figs are done use tongs to place several on each plate, next to the ricotta. Return the pan of wine to the hob, turn up the heat and boil to reduce and slightly thicken to a syrupy consistency. This will take approx 5 mins. Leave enough in the pan to be able to dress each plate of figs.
6. When the syrup is ready leave it to partially cool (it will thicken some more) and then either pour over each person's figs yourself or provide each plate its own espresso cup of syrup for dipping.

Traditionally in Italy this dish is made with Sambuca instead of Amarone. I tried it with both and much prefer it with Amarone. You could try any anise-flavoured spirit, or perhaps Marsala, port or brandy... What makes the dish work is the contrasting combination of the salty, crunchy pine nuts, the soft, cool ricotta and the warm, sweet figs and syrup.

Fig facts:

- Figs were one of the first plants to be cultivated by humans. Recent evidence found suggests they were cultivated in the Jordan Valley as early as 9400-9200 BC, ie before the first cereals were domesticated.
- The fig is actually a fig/flower – the tiny flowers are clustered inside.
- The most commonly eaten fig today is *Ficus carica*. Unlike many other species of fig, this one is not pollinated by wasps which lay their eggs inside the fig's cavity. So you can bite into your fig without too much worry.
- Adam and Eve used fig leaves to cover themselves after eating fruit from the garden of Eden, as they became self-aware. Fig leaves have long been used to cover the genitals of men and women in paintings and sculptures.
- Fresh and dried figs are a good source of antioxidants, which are believed to slow down, halt or even reverse (the onset of) natural ageing and certain diseases, including cancer, cardiovascular diseases and Alzheimer's disease.
- The fig is a distant relative of the mulberry, breadfruit and jackfruit.
- Fresh figs are delicious with buffalo mozzarella, prosciutto di Parma and/or mature goat's cheeses (eg Garrotxa). Try making a starter out of some of these ingredients, served with extra-virgin olive oil and wild rocket.

Ricotta facts:

- An Italian cheese made from the whey resulting from the production of mozzarella, provolone and other cheeses. The name means 're-cooked', because the whey is processed for a second time when it is used to make the ricotta.
- Ricotta is a good source of calcium. This is because most of the calcium in milk is contained in the watery whey ('buttermilk') part, rather than the creamy 'butterfat' component.
- Ricotta can be preserved through salting, baking or smoking. For this recipe it is essential to use fresh ricotta, which should be soft, bright white and mild in flavour. It goes off easily so eat within a week of purchasing.
- You can make ricotta yourself using nothing but whole milk, white distilled vinegar and salt...

