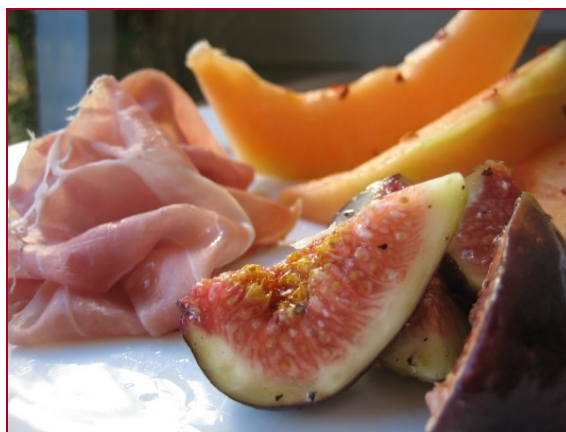


Prosciutto with melon and figs

Figs and melons are classic Italian pairings for prosciutto. This dish beautifully combines the three. It is served as an appetiser at the Chez Panisse Café during the summer when figs and melons are at the peak of their season. For best results prepare everything at the last minute (but make sure the ingredients are at room temperature first).



Serves: 6

Time: 20 mins

6 ripe and delicious figs

very good extra virgin olive oil

black pepper

1 ripe cantaloupe melon, or similar

12-18 paper-thin slices prosciutto di Parma (depending on their size)

chilli flakes, preferably marash pepper

1. Cut stems off figs and cut each one into 4 segments, vertically. Place figs in a bowl and toss gently with a little olive oil and a few coarse grinds of black pepper. Each fig segment should glisten with oil but not be swimming in it.
2. Slice top and bottom off melon, stand on one end and go around slicing off the skin. Cut in half and scoop out the seeds with a spoon. Slice each half into 9 equal wedges.
3. On each plate artfully arrange 3 melon slices, 4 fig segments and 2 or 3 slices of prosciutto. Sprinkle a few chilli flakes on the melon and serve.

Melon facts:

- 'Melon' comes from the ancient Greek word for apple and other seed-containing fruits. The Greeks called a melon a 'melo-pepon' ('apple-gourd'), which became shortened to 'melon' or similar in many languages. In Tuscany, where prosciutto with melon is a classic dish, the fruit still goes by its ancient name, 'popone'. A similar word is used in Romanian.
- Melons are relatives of cucumbers, squashes and gourds. Perhaps bizarrely, a cantaloupe is more closely related to a gherkin than it is to a watermelon. The watermelon gives away its alternative lineage (it's

African rather than Asian) by the fact its seeds are distributed throughout its flesh, rather than being encased within it.

- The fast-growing, juicy, large round melon has, unsurprisingly, been a symbol of fertility and abundance in many countries. At their most active, melons can gain 80cc a day. Watermelons can reach 30kg (60lbs).
- There are summer melons (such as cantaloupes and muskmelons) and winter melons (such as honeydews and canaries). The former are more aromatic, have rough rinds and only last a week or two. The latter are much less aromatic, have smoother rinds and will last weeks if not months. All summer melons, except true cantaloupes, should be allowed to ripen fully on the stem to the point where they sever themselves. Once harvested, melons may become more aromatic with time, but they will not become any sweeter, unlike some other fruits such as apples and bananas.
- North American 'cantaloupes' aren't really true cantaloupes, as evidenced by their netted skin. The true European cantaloupe – named after the commune *Cantalupo in Sabina*, in the Sabine Hills near Tivoli, a summer residence of the Pope – has a rough but never netted skin.
- Buy melons that smell sweet at their tips. Incidentally, the female cantaloupe is said to be sweeter than the male (of course). Store melons somewhere cool but not in the fridge. Wash them well before cutting as their skins can harbour nasty bacteria, such as salmonella, which may get dragged into the flesh as you slice.
- In case you were planning on it, don't try making a gelatin-set dessert or confection with *raw* melon puree, as, like papayas, figs, pineapples and kiwi fruits, melons unusually contain protein-digesting enzymes which render the gelatin useless for pastry-chef purposes. Scientists have devoted plenty of time to trying to work out why this is... Perhaps because the tummy ache resulting from eating too many melons from one melon patch prevents the animal from over-indulging, presumably reducing the melon patch's chances of having to put all its eggs in one basket, so to speak. Or because the enzymes rid the animals of intestinal parasites, allowing them to live longer and eat and disperse more melon seeds, better helping the melon conquer the planet, as all species hope to do. If only we could ask a melon to find out.

Sources:

On Food and Cooking, Harold McGee, 2004

Parma: A Capital of Italian Gastronomy, Giuliano Bugialli, 2005

www.wikipedia.org

