

taste buds

chef Larry Janes

Michigan berries on way

If there was just one reason to herald spring, it would be saying farewell to the tasteless, fibrous and exorbitantly priced imported or greenhouse strawberry. Better yet, it's probably chopping into that first fresh Michigan berry bursting with juice, sweetness and flavor.

I love strawberries! I can eat them like popcorn. Why not? They are great sources of fiber, iron, potassium and Vitamin C—a natural health food.

Dip them in chocolate and I feel seductive. Swirl into a malted and I feel like a kid again.

Whether they're sitting on a sundae or a waffle, surrounded by whipped cream or encased in Jell-O, I seldom turn down anything made with fresh Michigan strawberries.

As you read this, 95 percent of the strawberries available over the counter this week are hailing from California. As a matter of fact, more than 80 percent of the entire United States crop hails from La La Land. Have patience, dear readers, for in a matter of 30 days or less, Michigan berries will be flowing abundantly.

RECENT DROUGHT conditions on the West Coast might push strawberries to nearly \$2.75 per quart. In the middle of January, I paid pretty near \$4 per quart for berries that tasted like leftover Christmas ornaments. Let's face it, air freight is expensive.

The freshest Michigan berries, barring any more adverse weather conditions, should maintain their pricing levels from last year and hover around \$1 per quart, especially at your local farmer's market.

There is little questioning the excellent taste of fresh strawberry shortcake or even a frosty frozen strawberry daquiri, but today's trendy cook is always looking for new ways to use basic take-them-for-granted strawberries. Yours truly has experimented with strawberry vinegar, strawberry brandy and the classic strawberry jam or jelly. The freezer always gets a workout, keeping a constant supply for my cheesecake, French toast, sundaes and beverages.

Unfortunately, strawberries aren't all they are cracked up to be. Anything this good has to have a catch. Anyone who has purchased strawberries only to get them home and find a heaping basket of moldy fuzz will sooner forget them than praise them. I can attest to this, especially during hot summer months when a three-hour visit to a farmer's market ended up with a red-stained paper bag and a mess all over my car seat.

For optimum results, fresh strawberries should be kept in the refrigerator. Purists say to remove them from their store containers and place them in a colander in the crisper section of your refrigerator. Never wash them until ready to use and then simply rinse them under a gentle stream of cool water. After washing, the stems and caps can be removed and, if necessary, the berry can be patted dry. Washed berries should be used within 24 hours.

IF YOU ARE interested in freezing the little red jewels, there are two techniques you can follow. Freezing with the IQF (individually quick frozen) method can be accomplished by washing, prepping, patting dry and placing the berries on a cookie or baking sheet in the freezer for six hours. Pour the frozen berries into a freezer bag for optimum storage.

Alternatively, the berries can be sliced, mashed or pureed and mixed with sugar (processors use an 80 percent berry to 20 percent sugar ratio) and then frozen in covered containers. For best taste, use within six months.

So if you are looking for fresh ways to spruce up a plate of cottage cheese or bowl of cereal, now is the time to enjoy the taste of fresh "made in the USA" strawberries.



Store herbs for winter

By Marty Figley
special writer

I am expecting a good harvest from the herb garden so I can make many herbal concoctions to use when winds howl and the garden is asleep for the winter.

Like a squirrel storing nuts, we herbarists must store our bounty when it is at its peak in the herb garden.

Tarragon, thyme, basil, chives, lavender (for an exotic flavor) and mints are some of the herbs that can be made into vinegar.

For a different flavor I will spear a clove of garlic with a toothpick and put it in the bottle along with the basil as it steep.

VINEGAR is very easy to make, for use in salads and marinades. After picking the herbs I will wash them well and swirl them in a salad spinner to dry, fill a glass container at least two-thirds full, twisting the stems and leaves to release the oils.

Then the container will be filled with a five-percent-acidity vinegar (white if I'm going to add an herb for decoration or if I'm making cold or chive blossom vinegar and regular cider vinegar for the others), cover with a non-metal lid and set in the sun for about a week.

Then the vinegar solution will go to a cool dark place for four to six weeks to cure the garlic comes out now, so the flavor won't be too strong. Strained and bottled the vinegar will be ready for use. Wine vinegars are especially nice.

Many culinary herbs dry well when they are spread out on a screen or laid in a basket lined with a paper towel. I will put many of them in bunches, secured with a rubber band, arrange a brown paper bag around them to keep the dust off, and hang them to dry in a warm, dark area with good air circulation.

Sage and other woody-stemmed herbs, such as

rosemary, tarragon, thyme and mints, are particularly successfully dried this way. As soon as they are dry, I will lightly roll the bag so the leaves fall to the bottom of the bag. By this time they will be corn-flake crisp and won't mold when put into jars for further use.

WHEN I HAVE a small quantity, I put the leaves on a paper towel on a flat dish and set it uncovered in the refrigerator. They are dehydrated in a few days, and the color is good.

Fifty-percent power is recommended, and a glass of water in the corner will protect the element.

Do not dry them to the very crisp stage because of the threat of fire and loss of oils. I will finish the drying in a basket set in a warm place. Oven drying is a pretty quick method with the pilot light only, or set the temperature in an electric oven very low (180 degrees). If I can smell the herbs, it means the oils are evaporating and the oven is too hot.

Sometimes I freeze the leaves on a tray and package them in small containers, or blend about one and one-half cups of water to a cup of loosely packed leaves, whirl them in a blender for two minutes, then freeze in ice cube trays.

A **MIXTURE** of eight ounces of soft margarine and about one-half cup of a preferred herb, one-half teaspoon lemon juice to bring out the flavor, frozen in the original container enables me to scoop just the right amount to use in many dishes: stews, vegetables, casseroles and on bread.

I use either one herb or a mixture such as summer savory or chives or tarragon, salad burnet, thyme and parsley, oregano and garlic granules, dill and garlic, or chives, chervil and parsley.

I will remember to label everything I preserve as I store it away. Chopped, frozen and dried herbs look surprisingly alike.

COOKING FOR MOM

By Larry Janes
special writer

IT HAS COME to our attention that there might be a few spouses, sons, or daughters who want to cook something for Mom on her special day and who can't tell the difference between a paper and a colander.

You do not need two years at a major culinary institution or, for that matter, be a graduate of Miss Cindy's Chocolate Chip Home Economics School to make a decent Mother's Day brunch. Granted, we will assume that you are not the offspring of Julia Child or Madeline Kamman, but we do realize that some moms can be critical, especially when recipes don't turn out just right.

We also know you want everything to be as perfect as it can be. Most importantly, you want to come out of the kitchen smelling like a rose.

Knowing this, I have compiled literally foolproof recipes, along with shopping needs, equipment lists, presentation suggestions and even ways to get the kids involved without major complications.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN to clip these tried and true recipes and lists, we must begin with "your mind." If you are, indeed, one of those people with five thumbs, this is being printed six days in advance so that you can make daily affirmations about your upcoming success. Don't wait until after watching "The Golden Girls" on television Saturday night to read the shopping and equipment list. Practice in advance.

Imagine yourself wearing a crown of cilantro and James Beard's flowing apron, twirling wooden spoons like a parade majorette. (Remember those good culinary feelings as you stand in the kitchen trying feverishly to recall which knob to turn for the oven temperature (the knob with numbers ranging from 150-500).)

With this information in hand, along with a clean dish towel, you can make a Mother's Day brunch that will be remembered, if not for eternity, at least till Mother's Day next year.

A MOTHER'S DAY MENU

Fresh Fruit Cup with Cream Cheese Sauce

Savory Biscuits with Honey Butter

Casserola Frittata

Fresh-Squeezed Orange Juice

THE EQUIPMENT LIST

The menu was carefully selected so the equipment list would be readi-

ly available in almost any kitchen. Rest assured that hiding in the bowels of the cupboard are the following culinary tools needed to complete the task. It might take getting down on your hands and knees, but trust me, it's there, somewhere.

3 bowls (bigger than a soup bowl, smaller than a pot)
1 paring knife
1 cutting board
2 forks
1 cookie sheet
1 plastic cup
1 set measuring spoons/cups
1 cake pan, preferably glass, about 11-by-13 inches
1 juicer
1 roll paper towel
Coffeepot/teapot (optional)

THE SHOPPING LIST

There is a remote possibility that some of these items will already be in your cupboard or refrigerator, especially the herbs, spices and some dairy products.

An assortment of fresh fruit (such as 1 banana, 1 small bunch seedless grapes, 1 basket strawberries, 1 apple, 1 cantaloupe)

Honey
Flour
Baking powder
Salt
Sugar
Butter
Shortening (such as Crisco)
Baking soda
Buttermilk
Dried dill weed
Chives (fresh or dried)
Eggs (at least 8)
1 loaf whole grain bread
Ham, bacon or sausage (make it Mom's favorite, not yours)
1 pound cheddar cheese, grated
1 small package cream cheese
Powdered sugar
Vanilla
1 dozen seedless oranges
Coffee/tea (if desired)

THE GAME PLAN

• Check for all ingredients and shop the day before.

• Depending on your choice of breakfast, brunch or lunch, choose appropriate starting time. Notice: allow two hours (not including set-up and clean-up) for cooking.

• Make coffee/tea/juice. Keep coffee/tea hot, juice cold.

4. Using cutting board and paring knife, prepare fresh fruit and sauce. Wash all fruit. Place on towel to dry. Make cream cheese sauce.

• Prepare Casserola Frittata. Precook bacon, ham or sausage. Drain all fat.

• Prepare savory biscuits.

• Prepare honey butter.

• Enjoy food with Mom.

• Clean up. More than any recipe, this means more to Mom than you will ever know. Leave kitchen looking as it did before you entered.



Making vinegar and drying and freezing are all ways to use herbs.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS