




Visions of (Dried) Plums Still Dance in My Head

TRADITIONS. They can't be forgotten, nor should be. Every November, as I'm starting to bake, I think of my Aunt Ida. We went to her house for Thanksgiving dinner, and in my young mind, no one made apple pie the way she did. Apple pie is not one of my favorites, but I couldn't conceive of Thanksgiving dinner without one.

These past few weeks, I've seen friends who've related similar thoughts. They always have donuts on Christmas morning, or they always have prime rib and Yorkshire pudding for New Years. Traditions go beyond food, but somehow, in my case, always lead back to it. (Ergo, my battle of the bulge.)

I can't remember a year when I didn't see "The Nutcracker". I watched it performed at the high school, at my granddaughter's pre-school, by the Joffrey Ballet, on TV. It wouldn't be winter without it. Visions of sugar plums should have been dancing in my head...but weren't. Instead, I was thinking about all the plum tarts, plum cakes, and plum sauces I made over the summer. Aah, but plum season is short. Could a sugar plum take its place? Wikipedia convinced me it could not: A sugar plum, evidently, is almost inedible. It's a rock-hard candy, oval shaped like a prune plum, coated in sugar. No parent who hoped to avoid an emergency trip to the dentist's office would offer a sugar plum to her progeny.

Would plums, therefore, be relegated to a super-short summer season? No! There are dried plums. We used to call them prunes before the ad-council got hold of them. In France and across Europe, they're still prunes, and they're used in sauces for pork and duck. They're a good source of vitamins and fiber. We should feed ourselves well, for good food, healthy food, food well-prepared starts traditions that our children and even grandchildren will always remember. This prune and walnut tart, with the balance of a ballerina en pointe, will now become a tradition on my holiday table. 

Prune (aka Dried Plum) Tart with Walnut Frangipane

INGREDIENTS

CRUST:

- 1 ¼ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 stick chilled unsalted butter, cut into pieces
- ¼ cup ice water

FILLING:

- 1 pound prunes, pitted
- 2 cups strong black tea (like Earl Grey)
- 1 ¼ cups walnuts, lightly toasted and finely ground
- ½ cup sugar
- Pinch kosher salt
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- 1 large or extra large egg
- 2 tablespoons heavy cream

Confectioners' sugar for serving

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Make the crust: In a food processor, combine the flour, sugar and salt. Pulse to combine. Add the chunks of butter and pulse until the mixture resembles coarse meal. With the machine running, add the ice water through the tube and process just until the mixture begins to clump together. Remove from the processor, form into a disk and wrap in plastic wrap. Chill at least ½ hour before rolling out to fit a 9-inch tart pan with a removable bottom.
2. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Line the tart shell with foil and fill with weights or dried beans. Bake the shell for 15 minutes. Remove the foil and weights, return the shell to the oven and bake an additional 5 minutes.
3. At least 1 hour before making the tart, pour the hot tea over the prunes and set them aside to marinate. Meanwhile, make the frangipane.
4. Place the ground walnuts, sugar and salt in a bowl and combine well. In a separate bowl, whisk together the melted butter, egg and cream. Stir the wet ingredients into the dry until combined.
5. Remove the plums from the poaching liquid and drain well on paper towels. Turn the frangipane filling into the tart shell, spreading it evenly. Place the prunes on top of the frangipane, crowding them closely, if necessary.
6. Bake the tart for about 30-35 minutes until the edges of the filling feel set and the center is firm on top, but slightly soft underneath. Cool to room temperature or until slightly warm. Sprinkle with confectioners' sugar and serve.



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KATHY HARRISON is a Barrington Hills resident who teaches the fine art of cooking.

For more information, call 847-381-4828.