

Desserts that focus on peaches

By David Tanis, Los Angeles Times

With hot, sultry weather comes luscious, sweet, juicy stone fruit – just what we’ve been waiting for. Peaches, nectarines, cherries, apricots and plums fall into this category, and they are the true delights of summer. They all taste good together, whether baked in a cobbler or sliced for a fruit salad.

But let’s focus on peaches.

At the market the other day, there were ripe peaches that had been delivered straight from the orchard. They had a hairy exterior called peach fuzz, which is not seen very often these days. There is a reason, though it may seem incredible: modern peaches are mechanically defuzzed before shipping. Evidently, it has been determined that consumers prefer a smoother peach, and they would rather not remove the fuzz themselves. So peach fuzz now refers more to adolescent boys’ cheeks than to fruit.

For a truly smooth-skinned peach, choose nectarines instead. Contrary to popular belief, a nectarine is also a peach, just a different (and completely fuzzless) variety. Consider them interchangeable, though some prefer one to the other.

Most peaches are shipped firm and underripe, an unfortunate reality. Make sure the ones you buy are not rock hard, and have skin that has already turned reddish-yellow, with no green patches. Then a few days at room temperature will suffice to make them soft and sweet.

Now, to peel or not to peel. For peaches that will be cooked, dipping them in boiling water for a brief moment makes the skin easily slip off. For peaches to be sliced and eaten raw, peeling with a sharp paring knife is preferable. With

nectarines, it's O.K. to opt for unpeeled.

Here are two Italian methods to serve peaches to their best advantage as a dessert. One way is rather brilliant. Cool red wine, spiced slightly or not, is poured over sliced peaches in a glass. It's a simple rustic-yet-elegant way to finish a meal. The tannins in the wine complement the fruit beautifully.

Another way, which requires a bit more finesse, is to serve peaches with zabaglione, the traditional egg custard flavored with musky sweet Marsala wine. Other sweet wines may also be used, like sherry or spumante. It takes just a few minutes to make, whisking over a double boiler. Zabaglione can be served hot, but in summer it is better cool. The faint butterscotch caramel-y flavor seems custom-made to accompany peaches.

Of course you will need ripe peaches for either of these desserts. But if fate should bless you with perfumed, perfectly ripe summer peaches, forget about any further adornment. Eat them as is, outside, letting the ambrosial juices drip where they may.