

MY CHERRY AMOUR

Angela Clutton reflects on her life-long love of the oh-so-fleeting cherry season, and rejoices in the recent resurgence of this beautiful native fruit

Image: Regula Ysewijn

The blousy beauty of spring's cherry blossom lining the streets seemed even more of a surprise and treat than usual this year, at the end of our seemingly never-ending winter. The daffodils and the snowdrops can tease with a false-dawn prospect of spring. Only when the cherry blossom comes is it really spring and—best of all—we know actual cherries are around the corner for actual summer.

As a child, summer meant for me afternoons sitting on the grass, squabbling with my sisters, dangling cherries on their stalks from our ears as makeshift earrings. We'd eat so many our fingers and tongues bore the fruity, juicy stains for a good while afterwards. Cherries are no less intrinsically linked in my heart with the arrival of summer these days—but now what I wonder at is all the many things I will be able to do with them in the kitchen, revelling in their depth of flavour, the range of colours, and the breadth of varieties.

From the deep red colour and sweetness of a stella, sasha or venus cherry, through to the pale rainier or napoleon cherries—there are so many interesting, delicious types to look out for as the season progresses. Some are heritage varieties, some are new breeds or strains. Many represent the most enormously heartening revival of Britain's cherry orchards.

In the 1950s we had around 18,000 acres of cherry fruit orchards in the UK. By the end of the century that was down to a slightly heartbreaking 1,000 acres. So much changed in that 50 years in how we produce, sell and buy produce. British cherries—like many other native fruits—were the loser. The sprawling size of cherry trees made them undesirable to farm given the need to maximise crops and acreage. Even worse, cherries have a

very short cropping season—running from June to early August, it is even shorter than the British summer itself. For British farmers, cherries were not a priority crop. Little wonder we have ended up at a point where the vast majority of the cherries we eat in Britain are imported from the USA or Turkey.

All of which makes the recent resurgence of British cherry orchards hugely encouraging. It is a modest resurgence, admittedly, but the more of us who choose to buy British cherries, the more of a chance there is of it continuing. As consumers we are—we all hope, anyway—more understanding than ever of the importance of buying seasonally, and trying to seek out produce that has not been flown in from thousands of miles away. Smaller trees are being bred to help farmers make the choice to give over fruit-yielding space. Producers are putting the work in to come up with varieties that taste absolutely outstanding.

Brogdale Farm is leading the charge, as it is with so many other orchard fruits. As the home of the National Fruit Collection it preserves over 325 different cherry varieties—not all of them produced on a sufficient scale to sell—which feels all the more fitting for being in Kent, the county that since the 1500s has been at the heart of the British cherry harvest.

That was the period when cherry orchards were first properly established in this country as a crop for more than just private use or in monastic gardens. Kent was chosen partly because it was close to London for transporting and selling the cherries; partly also because its sandy, well-drained soil is perfect for cherry trees to flourish. Take a drive or an amble through modern Kent in the spring and you will still be wowed by

the ethereal spectacle of its blossoms, and then again in the summer by its delicious fruits. When you see Kent cherries for sale, I urge you to buy them. They will be so sweetly compulsive to eat I bet you end up with similarly pink-stained fingers to mine as a little girl.

Very little can be more refreshing—or easier to prepare—on a scorcher of a day than cherries gleaming with freshness, piled up on crushed ice with some basil leaves torn over. Fancy getting a bit fancier? Then how about a fruit fool made by sitting pitted cherries for a couple of hours in brandy and ground cinnamon, before lightly pureeing them and forking through a 50-50 mix of Greek yoghurt and whipped cream. A few mint leaves will complete the elegance. Pitting in this case is essential, but for most other cherry recipes is optional. An option I tend to go for using my trusty cherry-pitter tool, which makes removing the stones barely any fuff at all—and I think probably less fuff than taking them out as you eat.

Cherry ice-cream is one of my absolute favourite summer ices; a gorgeous, slightly silly colour from the fruit, with a depth of flavour that I think beats strawberry ice-cream hands-down. Then there are cherry tarts, cherryade that again evokes memories for me of childhood summers, and cherry soup, which navigates skilfully a very tricky line between sweet and savoury.

When it comes to savoury cooking, sour cherries such as the morello variety are the usual choice. I can see why, with their helpful combination of sweetness and acidity. But don't discount sweet or semi-sweet cherries for savoury dishes. If anything, the sweetness can work even better as a contrast (although you might need a dash of vinegar to compensate for the lack of acidity the sour cherries have). Try throwing a handful of cherries in at the end of cooking duck, lamb or pigeon and they'll take on enough of the meat's juices to make for a cohesive balance and when served alongside the meat, offering a richly fruity hit.

I mentioned earlier the shortness of the cherry season—an undoubted shame but one that makes it all the more appealing for cooks to find ways of extending how we can enjoy them. At the end of every summer, my fridge always has a good few jars of cherry jam, and even more jars of 'cocktail cherries' macerating in maraschino, brandy and spices—my stand-by for year-round garnishing of negronis, Manhattans or old-fashioned, and also an excellent emergency pudding with ice-cream and some of the boozy juices poured over the top as a makeshift sauce.

But what am I doing, talking about the end of summer like this? Don't listen. All you need to focus on right now are thoughts of how you will use the summer's cherries to create lifelong food memories.



Where to buy

English cherries
Chegworth Valley
Elsey & Bent
Jock Stark
Paul Wheeler
Fresh Supplies
Ted's Veg
Turnips

New season cherries
from Turnips

