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by Barb Kemp

The CHARMING Strawberry

When choosing strawberries, smaller is better.

The strawberry is a berry gushing with charm. With simple style, it gracefully metamorphoses meals into elegance.

The versatility of this heart-shaped berry adds to its appeal. The strawberry fits easily into breakfast, lunch or dinner. It sits boldly at the breakfast table in a small dish surrounded with cereal. At lunch, it hides discreetly between two slices of bread -- gooey and sweet, smothered amongst peanut butter. At dinner it casually lingers with green spinach in a salad bowl -- tangy and sometimes sprinkled with nuts. As a grand finale, it's comfortably showcased in high-society glamour when dipped in dark rich chocolate. It's a tastefully accomplished berry. Which other fruit shares its brilliance?

When choosing strawberries, smaller is better. They should have green leafy tops. Keep their tops intact until just ready to eat because strawberries are sponges -- they absorb water and spoil easily. If one gets mouldy, the others will soon follow. So, do not wash strawberries until just ready to use.

If you are looking for taste, choose local berries. Strawberries do not ripen off the vine, so choose colourful red fruit. They should keep fresh in the refrigerator for up to three days. When the first local berries hit the store, don't procrastinate -- enjoy them immediately. They have a short growing season. If you wait longer than three weeks you may be enjoying raspberries instead.

If you need an excuse to eat strawberries; they are full of vitamin C and fibre. And, if you like trivia, they are the only fruit whose seeds are on the outside and not the inside. Each strawberry has over 200 seeds.

Indulge yourself with strawberries. They'll easily charm your heart.



Spinach Salad with Strawberries

10 cups spinach, washed, stems discarded
2 cups sliced strawberries
1 cup sliced mushrooms
½ red onion, thinly sliced
¼ cup lightly toasted pine nuts (optional)

Dressing

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
2 tablespoons honey
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1/3 cup olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

In a large salad bowl combine the spinach, strawberries, mushrooms, onions and optional pine nuts. In a small bowl whisk together the dressing ingredients. Just before serving toss salad with dressing. Season with salt and pepper.

Strawberry Chocolate Shortcake

Berries

2 pounds strawberries, hulled and sliced
2 tablespoons sugar

Shortcake

2 cups flour
1/3 cup sugar
2 teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
½ cup cold butter, cut into small cubes
3 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped
1 cup buttermilk
Whipping cream

Berries: Place strawberries in a bowl. Sprinkle sugar on top. Stir and set aside.

Shortcake: Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Line a 9-inch round cake pan with parchment paper. Combine flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt in a large bowl. Add butter and rub into flour with fingertips until resembles coarse meal. Add chocolate and buttermilk. With a fork stir mixture until a dough forms. Transfer dough to the cake pan and bake until golden on top, about 30 minutes.

When cool, cut shortcake into 8 wedges. Slice each wedge in half. Place bottom wedge on a plate, cover with strawberries and whipping cream. Add top wedge and sprinkle on more strawberries. Add a dollop of whipping cream and serve.

Barb Kemp is a chef who runs Recipes To The Rescue, 604-990-4593 e-mail recipestotherescue@shaw.ca