

LOCAL FLAVOR

A deliciously odd couple

Nothing quite shouts springtime in Virginia like the enchanting alchemy of rhubarb and strawberries cooked together, resulting in culinary gold.

These two have a long history here. In fact, the strawberries commonly eaten nowadays all over the world have their roots in Virginia. Jamestown colonists in 1607 found wild versions in abundance in the woods surrounding Cape Henry.

Later, that hardy but diminutive variety was taken back to Europe where, in 18th-century France, it was crossed with the much larger but less hardy Chilean strawberry, ultimately resulting in the modern species, revered the world over.

Rhubarb too, was once abundantly grown in Virginia, first introduced by European settlers in the 18th century. Known then as “pie plant,” it was prized for its large stalks – up to 18 inches – and for resembling pink celery.

Rhubarb has, sadly, fallen out of favor. That’s a shame, because the delectable fruit was a staple of traditional spring feasts in Virginia. In fact, a recipe for rhubarb pie can be found in Edna Lewis’ 1976 classic Southern cookbook, “The Taste of Country Cooking.”

The rhubarb plant’s enormous leaves are poisonous and should be avoided. Happily, when you purchase rhubarb at the grocery or farmers market, those nefarious leaves have been removed. Look for crisp stalks that aren’t wilted and are firm, but tender and not woody. Notably tart, rhubarb benefits from serious sweetening.

There are lots of heavenly dishes made from the comingling of rhubarb and strawberries. From jams to pies, cobblers to cakes, you can’t go wrong imagining what you can make with this winsome duo.

Do yourself a favor. Branch out into an old-timey taste treat that’s just waiting to be rediscovered this spring. It’s got it all: a proud local heritage, a winning appearance, and a delightful contemporary zing. Don’t be the last on your block to get on board the rhubarb-strawberry express. ♦

Gingered Rhubarb-Strawberry Crumble

Ingredients (Serves 6)

2 ½ lbs rhubarb, stalks trimmed, cut into ¾-inch pieces
¾ cup sugar
1 lb strawberries, hulled and halved if large

Ginger - walnut topping:

3 tbsp cold unsalted butter, cut into pieces
¼ cup all-purpose flour
¼ cup packed light brown sugar
3 tbsp sugar
3 tbsp AR’s Hot Southern Honey
1 tsp ground cinnamon
1 tsp ground ginger (2 tsp fresh ginger, peeled and grated)
¾ cup old-fashioned oats
⅔ cup coarsely chopped walnuts
Vanilla ice cream for serving

Instructions

Preheat the oven to 375°. Butter a shallow oval baker. In a medium-sized saucepan, combine the rhubarb and sugar and cook, stirring constantly, for about 10 minutes until the rhubarb is somewhat softened and the sugar is dissolved. Place the prepared strawberries in the oval baker and pour the rhubarb mixture on top. Gently stir to combine and set aside while making the topping.

In a small bowl, combine butter, flour, brown and white sugars, honey, cinnamon, and ginger. Cut together until the mixture forms large crumbs. Add the oats and then crumble in the walnuts. Stir then scatter the topping over the fruit, pressing it in lightly.

Bake until the topping is golden brown, about 35 minutes. Cool briefly. Serve warm topped with vanilla ice cream.

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