

Bright, Tart Rhubarb Desserts

The distinctive
flavor of this
(surprise!) vegetable
is a welcome tonic after
the long, beige reign of winter

BY KATHLEEN STEWART



Toss sliced rhubarb with sugar and flour whenever it's going to be baked. The sugar draws out and sweetens the juices, and the flour thickens them into an irresistible sauce.

Others may look for robins, but at my bakery in northern California, we look for the first boxes of rhubarb as the sign that spring has truly arrived. Just when we begin to tire of winter's beige food, the bright red stalks of rhubarb come to cheer us. Not only is rhubarb's tart, distinctive flavor a welcome change, but the beautiful red color adds the sparkle we've missed through the long, dark months that came before.

An open-faced galette shows off the brilliant color that results when you combine rhubarb with raspberries. The fruit is too pretty to hide beneath a crust.

You can make smaller, individual rhubarb galettes instead of one big one by simply dividing the dough and filling into four portions.



THE THINNEST STALKS ARE THE TENDEREST AND THE LEAST BITTER

From early spring to midsummer, field-grown rhubarb is at its peak. The stalks are dark red, sometimes streaked with green, and have a full, tart flavor that needs a good dose of sugar to make it palatable. Though rhubarb is traditionally a spring crop, enterprising farmers now raise it in hothouses, and I sometimes find it in the supermarket at odd times of the year. Hothouse rhubarb has a pinker color, the stalks are usually thinner, and the flavor less bitter. When buying either variety, choose firm stalks with no brownish edges. Thin stalks are likely to be more tender; thick ones can be tough and stringy, so you may want to peel thicker stalks with a vegetable peeler before you cook them.

A crown of bright green leaves is a good sign: they indicate that the stalks were a relatively recent harvest. Always





Photos: Mark Thomas

Stewed rhubarb gives a slightly rough texture to this Rhubarb-Ginger Fool. For a smoother texture, purée the rhubarb mixture before you chill it.

Take care to preserve the lightness of the freshly whipped cream by using gentle strokes when folding in the puréed rhubarb.

discard the leaves before cooking, however; they contain oxalic acid, which is quite poisonous.

Wash and dry the stalks and cut off the ends if they're soft and brown or show signs of rotting. Wrap the stalks in a damp dishtowel or paper towel and refrigerate until ready to use.

A VEGETABLE THAT PRETENDS IT'S A FRUIT

Botanically speaking, rhubarb is a vegetable, but pastry cooks long ago adopted it as a fruit. An easy-to-grow perennial that flourishes once it's established, rhubarb was grown all over North America and Europe in the 19th century. Cooks of that era used it so often in their pies that rhubarb came to be known as "pie

plant." In many old cookbooks, I still find it called by that name.

Rhubarb has very little natural sugar. When cooked without anything to sweeten it, it's quite sour, with a flavor some compare to sorrel. But add sugar and rhubarb takes on an intriguing sweet-and-sour taste.

An exceptionally juicy fruit. To look at a raw stalk of rhubarb, you wouldn't think of it as juicy, but when cooked, rhubarb releases a surprising amount of liquid. When you're stewing rhubarb, there's no need to add any water to the pan. Heated for just a few minutes, the stalks will release enough of their own juices to sufficiently soften the fruit. Field-grown rhubarb tends to have a higher water content than hothouse

varieties and sometimes needs to be drained before it's used.

Occasionally, a recipe will call for rhubarb to be cooked before it's used in a cobbler, tart, or pie, but I never bother. I simply toss cut pieces of rhubarb with sugar and flour and let them sit for five or ten minutes before putting it in the pastry. The sugar draws out the rhubarb's juices, and the flour thickens them. After that, the cooking time is sufficient to soften the rhubarb thoroughly.

RHUBARB STANDS ALONE OR AS AN ACCENT TO OTHER FRUITS

Rhubarb has a strong, distinctive flavor that's wonderful all on its own, but its tartness makes it a pleasant accent to other fruits as well. The acidity of many citrus fruits—particularly oranges—goes well with rhubarb. More mellow fruits, like apples, can benefit from a pairing with the red stalks.

Rhubarb with strawberries is a time-honored combination, but I prefer rhubarb with raspberries, which I think stand up better than strawberries to the heat of the oven. Sweet spices, such as cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves, complement its flavor; I like rhubarb with fresh ginger, too.

Rhubarb-Raspberry Galette

This rustic tart is wonderful served warm with vanilla ice cream. To make individual galettes, roll the dough into four 8-inch circles and divide the filling between them. Flour and butter amounts are listed by weight (ounces) and by volume (cups or tablespoons). Use either measurement. *Yields one 12-inch tart or four 6-inch tarts.*

FOR THE DOUGH:

10 oz. (2¼ cups) all-purpose flour
1 tsp. sugar
¼ tsp. salt
6 oz. (12 Tbs.) unsalted butter, chilled and cut into small pieces
½ cup ice water

FOR THE FILLING:

1½ lb. rhubarb
1 cup raspberries
3 Tbs. flour
1 to 1¼ cups sugar

Melted butter for brushing
Sugar for sprinkling

To make the dough—Combine the flour, sugar, and salt; cut in the butter until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Add the ice water and toss just until the mixture holds together. Be careful not to overmix.

Press the dough into a ball, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate at least 30 min.

Line a baking sheet with kitchen parchment. On a lightly floured work surface, roll out the chilled dough into a 14-inch circle, about ⅛ inch thick. Transfer the dough to the prepared baking sheet and refrigerate while preparing the filling. (It's important to keep the dough as cold as possible until you're ready to bake.)

To make the filling—Trim the ends of the rhubarb and, if the stalks are more than 1 inch thick, cut them in half lengthwise. Cut the stalks into 1-inch-long pieces. In a large bowl, gently toss the rhubarb and raspberries with the flour and sugar. Let stand until moist, 5 to 10 min.

Heat the oven to 400°F. Gently spread the fruit in the center of the chilled pastry, leaving a 2-inch margin around the edge. Carefully fold the edge of the dough over the fruit, pleating it as you go. Brush the edge of the dough with melted butter and sprinkle with sugar.

Bake until the pastry is golden brown and the fruit is soft and bubbling, 45 to 55 min. Set on a rack to cool slightly.

Rhubarb-Ginger Fool

This dessert is called a fool because, well, almost anyone can make it. Just combine the stewed fruit with freshly whipped cream. *Yields 7 cups; serves six.*

1½ to 2 lb. rhubarb
1 to 1¼ cups sugar
2 Tbs. chopped candied ginger
2 Tbs. freshly grated ginger
2 cups heavy cream

Trim the ends of the rhubarb and, if the stalks are more than 1 inch thick, cut them in half lengthwise. Cut the stalks into 1-inch-long pieces.

In a stainless-steel pan with a tight-fitting lid, combine the rhubarb, sugar, candied ginger, and fresh ginger. (There's no need to add water; though it will look dry at first, the rhubarb will release enough water to cook without scorching.) Cook over low heat until the rhubarb is tender and falling apart, about 30 min. Refrigerate until well chilled.

Whip the cream until it holds soft peaks. Gently fold in the chilled rhubarb mixture until well combined. Spoon into serving glasses or bowls and chill until ready to serve.



Rhubarb Compote with Oranges & Figs

This compote is a stunning combination of flavors and colors. *Yields 7 cups; serves six to eight.*

1½ lb. rhubarb
4½ cups water
3 cups sugar
2 oranges
12 fresh Black Mission, Kadota, or Adriatic-type figs

Trim the rhubarb and cut it into 1-inch-long pieces; you should have about 6 cups. In a 4-qt. stainless-steel pan, combine the water and sugar and stir to dissolve the sugar. Bring the mixture to a boil, add the rhubarb, and cook until tender but not falling apart, 7 to 10 min. With a slotted spoon, transfer the rhubarb to a large bowl. Reserve the cooking liquid in its pan.

Grate the zest from both oranges; you should have about 3 Tbs. zest. Add 2 Tbs. of the zest to the liquid used to cook the rhubarb and continue to cook the syrup over medium-high heat for 15 to 20 min. Meanwhile, with a paring knife, cut off the ends of the oranges. Remove the remaining peel and

This compote is surprisingly delicious for something so simple. Serve it chilled with cookies, or warm over vanilla ice cream.



Rhubarb brings a refreshing tartness to the comforting taste of an apple crisp.

all the white pith. Cut each orange into ½-inch-thick slices and cut each slice in half. Trim the ends of the figs and cut them into quarters. Add the orange slices, figs, and remaining orange zest to the rhubarb. Strain the cooking liquid; you should have 2½ to 3 cups. Pour this syrup over the fruit. Chill several hours or overnight before serving.

Note: To substitute dried figs for fresh, make a syrup with 2 cups water and ½ cup sugar flavored with 1 Tbs. grated orange zest and half of a vanilla bean. Simmer this syrup for about 5 min. before adding 12 to 15 dried Black Mission or Calmyra figs. Continue simmering until the figs are tender, 30 to 45 min. Chill the figs in their poaching liquid before adding them to the compote. Don't use the fig-poaching liquid as part of the compote syrup—it tends to taste stemmy.

Apple-Rhubarb Crisp

Crisps are old-fashioned comfort food. I like them best served warm with a generous pour of fresh cream. *Serves eight.*

FOR THE TOPPING:

4½ oz. (1 cup) flour
3 oz. (⅔ cup packed) brown sugar
3 Tbs. sugar
¼ cup finely chopped toasted almonds or walnuts
½ tsp. ground cinnamon
4 oz. (8 Tbs.) butter, slightly softened and cut into small pieces

FOR THE FILLING:

2 lb. crisp baking apples (I like Gravensteins or Sierra Beauties)
1½ lb. rhubarb
1 to 1½ cups sugar
4 Tbs. flour
1 tsp. ground cinnamon



There's no need to cook the fruit before adding it to the crisp. Toss rhubarb and apples with sugar and flour to sweeten and thicken the juices; the fruit makes its own delicious sauce as it cooks.

To make the topping—In a bowl, mix together the flour, brown sugar, sugar, nuts, and cinnamon. Work in the butter until the mixture resembles dry oats. The mixture should just hold together and look crumbly.

To make the filling—Heat the oven to 350°F. Peel, core, and quarter the apples. Cut each quarter into four chunks; you should have about 5 cups. Trim the rhubarb and cut it into 1-inch-long pieces ½ inch wide; you should have about 5 cups of rhubarb. In a large bowl, toss the apples and rhubarb with the sugar, flour, and cinnamon until well coated. Transfer the apple and rhubarb mixture to a 2-qt. baking dish and sprinkle the crisp topping over the top. Bake until the topping is golden brown and the fruit is bubbling, 1 hour to 1 hour, 15 min. Cool slightly before serving.

Kathleen Stewart is on the lookout for rhubarb in Healdsburg, California, where she is a partner at the Downtown Bakery. ♦