

# Ripeness Matters For Fruit Lovers

**BY BILL DALEY**  
Chicago Tribune (MCT)

Ripeness matters. Ask any rabid tomato or strawberry lover who spends most of the year in (wise) denial waiting for that perfect ripeness. So firm is the focus on the ripe that one could be forgiven for thinking ripeness is a moment as cruelly sharp as the blade of a shiv. Here today, a goner tomorrow.

Yet ripeness can be a much more relative concept than one might expect.

"Really, ripeness is a personal thing," says Tovah Martin, a horticulturist and writer based in Roxbury, Conn. "For example, I eat gooseberries when they're over-ripe. I've tried them the other way and, eh, nothing. But let them get slightly overripe, and to me they're delicious. That's the beauty of being a gardener. You can experiment and define ripeness for yourself."

"Webster's New World College Dictionary" defines ripe as: "fully grown or developed ... ready to be harvested and used for food, as grain or fruit."

Harold McGee, in his landmark book, "On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen," wrote that ripening was "long considered to be an early stage in the fruit's general disintegration. But now it's clear that ripening is a last, intense phase of life. As it ripens, the fruit actively prepares itself for its end, organizing itself into a feast for our eye and palate."

Ripeness has, of course, always mattered, but today's emphasis on local and seasonal foods may be honing and articulating an appetite for it as an ideal.

You can experience ripeness in two ways this season with two new books, both called "Ripe": Nigel Slater a London-based food writer, has followed up on his vegetable book, "Tender," with a recipe-filled musing on fruit called "Ripe: A Cook in the Orchard" (Ten Speed: \$40) and Cheryl Sternman Rule has written a rainbow-hued book "Ripe: A Fresh, Colorful Approach to Fruits and Vegetables" (Running Press \$25).

Still, determining when to join in on McGee's proverbial ripeness feast has long been dictated by necessity and personal taste. Slater, for example, writes lyrically of "walking round the garden late on an autumn morning, pushing past the spiders' webs that festoon the pathways and plucking those last, wine-colored berries from their blackened canes as is good as life gets."

Fruits and vegetables do reach a peak stage in life. A vine-ripened red tomato is a perfect example. But that doesn't mean the produce is inedible before or after that point, says Willi Galloway, author of "Grow Cook Eat: A Food Lover's Guide to Vegetable Gardening" (Sasquatch, \$29.95). She focuses on the delicious possibilities found in eating produce at the various stages of its life. How one prepares the vegetable or fruit will depend on the age, she says, noting that young small arugula leaves will end up raw in salads while older, tougher leaves go into pasta sauces.

Gardeners like Martin, Slater and Galloway have a far easier time deciding when something is ripe for them. The rest of us must follow the dictates of supermarkets and, if we're lucky, farmers markets or roadside stands. Use your senses to judge quality and ripeness. Touch, smell, nibble if you can; don't go by looks alone.

"Just because it looks perfect doesn't mean it will taste perfect," Rule says, urging consumers to ask questions, especially at farmers markets.

"Speak up, ask them to pick for you," she suggests. "Being bold and unafraid is my biggest piece of advice at farmers markets. And that goes for the produce manager at the supermarket as well."

## PEACH MASCARPONE FLATBREADS

Prep: 20 minutes Cook: 4 minutes

Makes: 6 appetizer servings  
This recipe from Cheryl Sternman Rule's "Ripe: A Fresh, Colorful Approach to Fruits and Vegetables" puts ripeness to work, using fruit in a savory, summery appetizer.

1 orange  
4 whole-wheat flatbreads (4-6 inches wide)  
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

Salt and freshly ground pepper  
1/2 cup (4 ounces) mascarpone cheese

3 medium firm but ripe peaches (about 1 pound), peeled, thinly sliced

1/3 cup thinly sliced red onion  
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar  
1. Remove half the orange zest in fine shreds, the other half in long coils. Squeeze orange juice into a small bowl.

2. Brush flatbreads with oil; sprinkle with salt and pepper. Repeat on the flip side. Grill bread over medium direct heat, flipping once, until they puff slightly and grill marks appear, 3-4 minutes. Cool to room temperature.

3. Season the mascarpone with [teaspoon each salt and pepper, the shredded orange zest (save the coils) and 2 tablespoons orange juice. Stir until smooth. Divide

among the flatbreads, spreading thickly. Top with peach and onion. Cut each flatbread into thirds (if oblong) or quarters (if round).

4. Place the vinegar in a small microwave-safe bowl; microwave until slightly thickened and reduced by about half, about 1 minute. Drizzle over flatbreads. Garnish with the coils of orange zest. Serve immediately.

Nutrition information per serving: 296 calories, 16 g fat, 6 g saturated fat, 24 mg cholesterol, 33 g carbohydrates, 7 g protein, 231 mg sodium, 4 g fiber

## A SALAD OF SUMMER LEAVES, CURED PORK AND CHERRIES

Prep: 15 minutes Makes: 2 servings as a light lunch

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard  
2 teaspoons red wine vinegar  
3 tablespoons olive oil  
Pinch of salt  
Freshly ground pepper

3 tablespoons whipping cream  
Parsley, finely chopped

2 1/2 to 3 1/2 ounces thinly sliced cured ham, such as lomo, speck or coppa  
4 generous handfuls salad leaves

4 handfuls cherries, halved, pitted

Put the mustard in a small bowl with the vinegar, olive oil, salt and a grinding of pepper. Whisk together; whisk in the cream. Add parsley. Tear the ham into strips. Toss the salad leaves with the ham. Add cherries. Drizzle over the dressing.

Nutrition information per serving: 500 calories, 32 g fat, 8 g saturated fat, 47 mg cholesterol, 52 g carbohydrates, 11 g protein, 391 mg sodium, 9 g fiber



Many foods, like Ranier Cherries, have a peak ripeness time but ripeness is really a variable quality with different meanings to different tastes. (Bill Hogan/Chicago Tribune/MCT)

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