

FORAGING By Andrea Clurfeld

Bright, ripe Jersey strawberries are ready for picking and eating

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Late last week, as I drove around western Monmouth County and northern Ocean County, I started to see the signs: Illustrations of strawberries, accompanied by directional arrows and enticements for "you-pick," dotted the roadsides, as well exclamations of "JERSEY FRESH STRAWBERRIES!" on hand-painted wooden boards.

It's strawberry season in the Garden State, and it's here just in time for Memorial Day feasting.

According to the state Department of Agriculture, "Early harvests of great quality berries have begun, though the bulk of the crop will be harvested toward the end of the month, with lower volumes to continue through the first week of June. Chandler variety berries are picked when ripe and have more red interior color than white. They're grown in raised beds, under black plastic, with a large berry size and excellent taste."

Talk like this gets my gastric juices flowing to flood levels. Do remember one important thing about strawberries: If not grown organically, there's a good chance the berries you buy have been heavily sprayed with pesticides. So wash all berries before eating and give conventionally grown strawberries an extra-good rinse.

Then take advantage of spring's bounty. After you've gotten your fill eating them out of hand, using them to top shortcake, cereal and ice cream, and baking them with rhubarb in pies, try these other strawberry suggestions:

Make a dessert soup with strawberry puree. Stem and hull 2 pints of strawberries and puree in a food processor or blender with the juice of 1 lemon. Strain the puree through a fine-mesh sieve into a nonreactive (read: nonaluminum) bowl. If you wish, stir in a little honey or a sugar syrup and refrigerate until well chilled. To serve, top the strawberry puree with companionable cut-up fruits and/or a dollop of sherbet or sorbet. Garnish with sprigs of fresh mint and serve.

Make a strawberry smoothie or shake. Puree strawberries, as above, and whirl in a blender with plain yogurt, honey, a pinch of two of cinnamon and one other chopped-up fruit: orange, banana, apricot, cantaloupe, mango, kiwi or papaya. Serve as a breakfast smoothie or dessert shake.

Make a sophisticated but simple confection. 1) Serve sliced strawberries with a splash of aged balsamic vinegar, the thick, almost syrupy kind. 2) Serve sliced strawberries laced with an orange-scented dessert wine. 3) Serve whole strawberries with a side of creme fraiche dusted with both a pinch of cinnamon and superfine sugar.

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