

# Sweet taste of summer

There can be no sweeter way of knowing that summer is just around the corner.

June – the month of Wimbledon, the Royal Norfolk Show and Pimms. And it is impossible to imagine this month without British strawberries. The moment you first taste the fully-ripe, sweet British berry is the moment when you know that summer is here, even if you are sheltering from a downpour at the time!

Many of the varieties we are used to today were introduced from abroad, but the wild wood strawberry is indigenous to Britain, and you will still find it in hedgerows and copses if you look hard enough, fruiting from now until August. In Shakespeare's time they were highly valued, and being less sweet than the varieties we now enjoy, would have been eaten with wine and honey, sugar being a luxury that only the very rich could enjoy.

In 1630, New World explorers discovered the larger and sweeter Virginian strawberry, and in 1712 the even bigger Chilean strawberry. The introduction of these varieties led to something of a strawberry mania, which led to the development by nurserymen of varieties which would fruit from February right through to October. But even in the height of this madness, June was the real season when strawberries were at their best, and cheapest.

One of the most successful hybrids was called Keens' Imperial, named for the Middlesex market gardener Michael Keens who developed it. This was the starting point for the proliferation of puddings, jams, jellies and ice creams which we associate with strawberries today.

Nowadays, the market is dominated by the Elsanta variety, with its firm flesh, sweet taste and long growing season. This isn't



necessarily the most flavoursome variety, and I would recommend scouring the farm shops and pick-your-owns of Norfolk to dig out others to try. Let your own palate be your guide.

The traditional accompaniments of sugar and cream are always delicious, but do try other ways of serving them. My recipe for strawberries with basil, black pepper and balsamic vinegar (below) may sound strange, but it is a great combination.

I recommend you eat a couple of the strawberries before you start so you can find out if the fruit is naturally sweet enough; if they are a little sharp add a small amount of sugar when mixing it all together.

My other recipe this month, a delicious strawberry trifle, requires a bit more

preparation time. Trust me, the end result is worth it.

One final possible reason for indulging in this month's seasonal treat: according to Patrick Holford, founder of the Institute for Optimum Nutrition, who carried out a study on behalf of British Summer Fruits, strawberries can provide a real boost to your love life, packed as they are with zinc, antioxidants and vitamin C.

This may, of course, be pure PR hype – but it will be fun finding out!

Next month: Cherries

**What's In Season**

**Fruit/veg:** Aubergine, radishes, spring onions, raspberries

**Meat/fish:** Crab, sea trout, lamb

## Strawberry Trifle With Crushed Amoretti Biscuits

### Amoretti Biscuits

Makes 6 desserts

**For the jelly**

- 300g strawberries, hulled
- 50g caster sugar
- juice of half a lemon
- 4 sheets of leaf gelatine
- 375ml water
- 25ml crème de peche

**For the custard**

- 165g caster sugar
- 150ml double cream
- 375ml whole milk
- 1 vanilla pod, split and seeds scraped
- 25g cornflour
- 4 large egg yolks

**For the strawberry mousse**

- all of the strawberry pulp left from making the jelly
- 100ml chilled custard
- 200ml double cream
- juice of half a lemon
- 50g caster sugar
- 18 crushed amoretti biscuits
- 6 quarters of strawberries for garnish

**To make the jelly layer**

■ Slice the strawberries and put them in a heat proof bowl over a pan of gently simmering water. Stir in the sugar and lemon juice, cover the bowl with cling film and leave for 40 minutes. Check the pan of water underneath occasionally and top up with boiling water.

■ While the strawberries are cooking line a sieve with wet muslin and place it over a bowl. When the strawberries are cooked, place them in the sieve and leave to drip through, do not press the pulp through or you will lose clarity in the jelly. Save the fruit pulp for the mousse later on.

■ Soften the gelatine in cold water, pour the strawberry liquid into a clean pan and heat



until just at the point of boiling; then take off the heat. Remove the gelatine from the cold water, squeeze out all the water and put it into the hot strawberry liquid. Whisk until it's dissolved, then put it through a sieve.

■ Now add the cold water and the crème de peche to the strawberry mixture and divide it between 6 glasses. Place in the fridge and leave until set, about 2 hours.

**To make the custard layer**

■ Put the milk, half of the cream and the seeds from the vanilla pod in a pan and bring to a simmer. Meanwhile in a large bowl mix together the sugar, cornflour and egg yolks to a smooth paste, then mix in the other half of the cream.

■ When the milk and cream has started to simmer, take off the heat and pour into the egg mixture, stirring continuously. Strain the mixture through a fine sieve into a clean pan and stir over a medium heat for 5 minutes until it thickens and the cornflour is cooked out.

■ Pass the custard through a sieve into a bowl and cover the surface of the custard with cling film to stop a skin forming. Leave to chill in the fridge.

■ When the jelly is completely set and the custard is chilled, mix the custard until its smooth, reserve 100ml for the mousse and pour even amounts into each glass on to the top of the jelly layer. Now leave to set in the fridge for 1 hour.

**To make the mousse layer**

■ While the custard layer is setting, make the strawberry mousse. Semi whip the cream and sugar to soft peaks. Blitz the strawberry pulp in a food processor until smooth, then add in the remaining custard and mix together. Now fold the strawberry custard and the lemon juice into the semi whipped cream.

■ When the custard layer has set, using a piping bag (or carefully with a spoon) put an equal amount of mousse into each glass and put back into the fridge to set for at least 30 minutes.

**Serving**

■ When the mousse has set they are ready to serve. Just before serving sprinkle the biscuits over the top, garnish with ¼ of a strawberry and dust with icing sugar.