

WHERE HAVE ALL THE PEAR TREES GONE?

BY DEVANY VICKERY-DAVIDSON



As long as I can remember, I have had a love affair with pears. Their supple juiciness, sweet buttery flesh, voluptuous shape, tender fragrance, and long season all contribute to keeping the affair steamy. Also fanning the flame is the way they work with my favorite cheeses and how brightly they shine in a variety of dishes, from appetizers to desserts. Every fall I express my devotion by making pear chutney and jelly.

California produces some sublime examples of the fruit, and the Bartlett is prime among them—60 percent of the Bartlett crop in the United States is grown here in the Golden State. The variety was originated in Berkshire, England, in the 17th century, by John Stair. He sold some of his pear tree cuttings to a horticulturalist named Williams, who further developed the variety and renamed it after himself. After pear seedlings crossed the Atlantic with the early colonists, the Williams pear found fame and fortune in 1812, under the tutelage of nurseryman Enoch Bartlett, of Dorchester, Massachusetts. Bartlett, unaware of the pear's true name, distributed it under his own name. Ever since, the pear has been known as the Bartlett in the United States, but is still referred to as the Williams pear in other parts of the world. Bartlett pear trees eventually came out West in the covered wagons of forty-niners heading for the California Gold Rush. They became a serious cash crop in the East Bay about 1900 and remained a huge industry here until the 1950s.

As a recent transplant to the Bay Area from the Midwest, I was rather surprised to learn that the valley below my new home in Danville was once home to the world's largest Bartlett pear farm. Neighboring orchards in a variety of sizes lined most of the valley floor throughout Danville and San Ramon. Bishop Ranch was once part of a 3,000-acre parcel of land called Norris Ranch. Occupied by pear

trees, walnut groves, and herds of sheep, Norris Ranch was subdivided in 1895. A Mr. Bishop acquired 1,770 acres of the property, naming it for himself and developing it into the world's largest Bartlett pear farm. Upon his death 60 years later, the land was sold for development, and Western Electric acquired Bishop Ranch to house a manufacturing plant. In the 1970s residential parcels of Bishop Ranch were sold, leaving dormant 585 acres zoned for controlled manufacturing. Sunset Development Company saw the opportunity to create a business park, which they named Bishop Ranch, and which soon launched the economic growth for the entire region.

Today, the Bishop Ranch Business Park is home to the likes of Chevron, General Electric, IBM, and AT&T. Where pear and walnut groves once flourished, multi-story buildings populate the valley floor. Express buses filled with some of the 30,000 who work here have replaced the farm equipment and the scent of ripening fruit. Only a small grove of walnut trees remains on the property. The pear farms of today's California are situated well north and east of the San Ramon Valley.

The agricultural tradition of San Ramon Valley is honored at places like Forest Home (www.sanramonhistoricfoundation.org), where students and the public are educated about the importance of agriculture in our local history. Forest Home holds the 16-acre Boone Family Farm and is also the site of one of our area's newest farmers' markets. Every Saturday the grounds fill with vendors selling fruits and vegetables, and attendees can enjoy a food court and live music. At 10 a.m. historic tours are given through the barns and gardens.

Want to try growing your own pear tree? Many homeowners in the East Bay have small orchards with pears being a prime

crop. Pears can be easily dry-farmed once well established, making them ideal for our climate. The Bartlett, scientifically known as *Pyrus Communis*, is a member of the rose family. The trees require rich soil, warm days, and cool nights. Once established, they do not need much attention. Most Bartlett trees have a life of 50 to 75 years, though some still produce after 100 years. In winter the trees should be pruned. This is also the best time to plant a bare-root pear tree. It takes five to seven years for a Bartlett tree to produce fruit. Bartletts are unique in that they are self-pollinating: They do not require help from the bees. Bartlett fruits do not ripen properly on the tree and should be picked when mature, but green. Bringing pears to your own preferred degree of ripeness is quite simple. The key: always ripen the pears in a bowl at room temperature. Once they have reached desired ripeness, place them in the refrigerator to slow any further ripening. Depending on their degree of ripeness, California Bartletts can hold in the refrigerator for about a week.

Those who might like to celebrate our local “pear heritage” by dining out can visit The Peasant & The Pear in Danville. Chef Rodney Worth created The Peasant & The Pear in 2004 as a gourmet deli and sandwich shop in San Ramon, but the eatery quickly outgrew its tiny strip-mall surroundings and moved to downtown Danville. The “Peasant” part of the name reflected the restaurant’s unpretentious, rustic cuisine, showcasing fresh, seasonal ingredients—the very foundation of flavorful peasant food. The “Pear” honored the local produce that put San Ramon on the map. Chef Worth incorporates pears into many of his signature dishes, including Pear Quesadillas (see recipe), the Bishop Ranch Salad (featuring roasted pears, candied walnuts, and blue cheese over organic baby greens tossed with creamy balsamic vinaigrette), San Ramon Rustic Flatbread Pizza (with roasted pears, gorgonzola, caramelized onions, and mozzarella), and the Warm Pear Tart, a delicious blend of puff pastry baked with fresh pears and cinnamon streusel, then topped with vanilla bean ice cream and caramel sauce. 🍷



PEAR QUESADILLA

The Peasant & the Pear

PEAR CHUTNEY

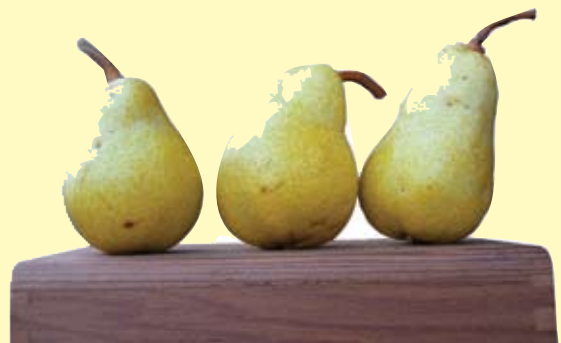
- ¼ cup dry white wine
- ½-inch wedge of red onion, sliced thin
- 2 tablespoons chopped red bell pepper
- 1 tablespoon dark brown sugar
- 1 Bartlett pear, peeled, cored and cut into 1-inch chunks
- 2 tablespoons of water, or more if needed
- Red chili flakes

Place all ingredients in a small saucepan. Cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, until pear is crisp-tender and most of the liquid has evaporated. (You may add a bit of water if liquid completely evaporates before pear is cooked.) Transfer mixture to a blender or food processor and add the 2 tablespoons of water. Blend quickly, just until mixture comes together as a thick sauce, with ¼-inch chunks of pear, onion, and pepper. Add more water if necessary to achieve the consistency you desire. Place pear mixture in a bowl, and stir in chili flakes to taste. Let chutney cool completely before serving. Chutney can be stored in the refrigerator, covered, for up to 3 days.

QUESADILLA

- 1 12-inch flour tortilla
- ½ of a d’Anjou pear, cored and cut into ¼-inch slices
- 6 ¼-inch slices of Brie cheese
- 2 tablespoons shredded mozzarella cheese

Heat oven to 425°. Lay tortilla on a flat surface. Spread pear slices across bottom half of the tortilla. Lay Brie across the top of the pear slices. Sprinkle mozzarella over the Brie. Fold top half of the tortilla over the pear and cheese mixture. Transfer tortilla to a lightly greased or parchment-lined cookie sheet and bake until cheese melts and bubbles, about 3-5 minutes. Remove tortilla from oven, cool slightly, then cut into 6 wedges. Serve on a plate or platter with chutney on the side. Serves 6 as an appetizer





ROASTED PEARS WITH ALMONDS AND WINE

Devany Vickery-Davidson, Dinner Party Cooking School

- 6 Bartlett pears, cut in quarters and cored
(use a melon baller)
- ¼ cup local honey
- ¼ cup light brown sugar
- ¼ cup dry red wine
- 1 teaspoon freshly grated cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg

Place pears in a 9 x 13-inch baking dish in a single layer. Mix honey, brown sugar, wine, nutmeg and cinnamon together in a small bowl. Pour over the pears and stir till coated. Bake at 400° for 20-30 minutes or until tender. Spoon into individual bowls and garnish with almonds.

GLAZED ALMONDS

- 2 egg whites
- 8-10 ounces whole blanched almonds
(or slivered almonds can be substituted)
- ⅓ cup sugar

Whip the egg whites till foamy, stir in almonds till well coated. Drain off excess egg white and stir in sugar. Spread on a silpat or parchment with baking spray. Separate with a spatula. Bake at 325° for 12 minutes, stirring frequently. They should be golden brown and caramelized.

Devany Vickery-Davidson started her culinary career with a catering company in Atlanta before moving to Chicago, where she worked in non-profit PR and created the Dinner Party Cooking School, www.dinnerpartycookingschool.com. On returning to her native state of California she has devoted herself to cooking, glass and ceramic arts, gardening, and doing what she can in support of sustainable farming. Her food and travel blog can be seen at www.travelingfork.blogspot.com

GRILLED PEAR, HAM AND CHEESE SANDWICH

Devany Vickery Davidson, Dinner Party Cooking School

- 8 slices good sourdough bread
- Butter
- Honey mustard
- ½ pound medium sliced Gruyère
- ½ pound Brie, chilled and sliced
- ¾ lb. thinly sliced ham (rosemary ham or Black Forest ham)
- 2 Bartlett pears, cored and sliced
- 2 medium onions, sliced thinly and sautéed until caramelized.

Butter the bread slices on one side. On the unbuttered side of four slices, assemble ingredients in the following order:

- honey mustard
- a layer of both cheeses
- ham
- pear slices
- onions

Add another layer of honey mustard to the remaining four unbuttered sides. Place sandwiches on a grill with a brick or panini weight and cook until golden brown.

This goes very well with late harvest tomato soup or a small green salad. Serves 4.

PEAR, BLUE CHEESE & ENDIVE NIBBLES

Devany Vickery Davidson, Dinner Party Cooking School

- 8 ounces mascarpone cheese
- 8 ounces Point Reyes Blue Cheese (or Maytag Blue)
- 2 tablespoons butter, softened
- 3 green onions cut into one-inch pieces
- 2 tablespoons rough-cut peppercorns (I like to use a blend of red, green and black)
- 2 bunches of red or green endive separated
- 2 Bartlett pears, cored and thinly sliced
- Walnut pieces, toasted

In a food processor, add cheeses, butter, green onions, and pepper. Mix till smooth. Transfer mixture into a pastry bag with a fluted tip. Pipe into the endive leaves. Top with a pear slice and a walnut piece.

Variations: You can slice the pears more thickly and pipe directly on to the pear slices. You can also pipe it into hollowed out cherry tomatoes, snow peas, small peppers or onto crackers