
FOOD ROOTS

BY LIZ DRIVER

STRAWBERRIES + SHORTCAKE = CANADA

“Come, Hector, – come, Louis,” said Catharine, jumping up, “I long to be gathering the strawberries; and see, my flowers are faded, so I will throw them away, and the basket shall be filled with fresh fruit instead, ... there is the opening to the Beaver Meadow.”

And the sunlight was seen streaming through the opening trees as they approached the cleared space, which some called the “Indian clearing,” but is now more generally known as the little Beaver Meadow. It was a pleasant spot, green, and surrounded with light bowery trees and flowering shrubs, of a different growth from those that belong to the dense forest. Here the children found, on the hilly ground above, fine ripe strawberries, the earliest they had seen that year, and soon all weariness was forgotten while pursuing the delightful occupation of gathering the tempting fruit.

Excerpted from *Lost in the Backwoods, a Tale of the Canadian Forest*, by Catharine Parr Traill, London, England, 1882.

What child can forget gathering strawberries in early summer? Whether in a wild berry patch or at a U-pick farm under the same warm sun described by Catharine Parr Traill, the memory is indelible. All children should have the experience of picking and eating this luscious Ontario fruit right off the plant while revelling in their juice-stained fingertips!

As a young girl, I remember clutching my tin cup and following Great Aunt Ella along the gravel road at the top of the hill behind our Muskoka cottage as she looked for the best wild strawberry patches. Remarkably, it didn't take long to fill our containers with the small, aromatic berries, and the jam we made afterwards was exquisite. I still rejoice in finding wild strawberries on walks: along the banks of the Green River northeast of Toronto, for example, or in the hay fields at our farm in Prince Edward County. And when I find myself driving by a berry farm, nothing can sway me from stopping to purchase or pick a basket.

Strawberries are a precious and fleeting summer fruit, although new cultivated varieties have extended the traditional season. The height of the harvest falls around the same time as Canada Day and, for nearly a century-and-a-half, strawberry shortcake has been a featured dessert for gatherings on the first of July. On Canada's birthday, the berries' red colour adds a patriotic touch to the celebration.

Nothing rivals this simple dish of sweetened fruit between two biscuit layers topped with

whipped cream and decorated with a few perfect berries. Strawberry shortcake can be made with white cake, but the classic Canadian version has always been made with tea biscuit dough, often enriched with butter and an egg. The biscuit layers are quick to make and the dessert, easy to assemble. (The presence of “short” in the name does not refer to its fast cooking but to the butter in the biscuit, just as shortbread is a butter-rich cookie.)

Of course, there are many ways to enjoy strawberries other than with shortcake: in a bowl with fresh cream and sugar; as jam or a sauce; combined with rhubarb in a pie; as an ice-cream flavour; or set in a cool, creamy dessert. Still, strawberry shortcake remains my essential pleasure in late June and early July, especially when eaten outdoors on the lawn with family and friends – an iconic Canadian pastime perfectly in tune with today's “eat local, eat fresh” ideal. □

Liz Driver is the author of Culinary Landmarks: A Bibliography of Canadian Cookbooks, 1825–1949. As the curator of Campbell House Museum in Toronto, she invites volunteers to join the cooking program in its nineteenth-century kitchen with open hearth and bake oven. She also teaches Applied Food History at George Brown College, and serves as past president of the Culinary Historians of Ontario. Her “Food Roots” column appears in every issue of Edible Toronto.

On Canada Day, join Liz Driver at Campbell House Museum (www.campbellhousemuseum.ca) for Strawberries on the Lawn, and enjoy strawberry shortcake and iced tea alongside Celtic fiddlers and Scottish country dancers.

And check out the Strawberry Events page on our website for a list of First Fruits of Spring festivities being held in Toronto during the month of June.





STRAWBERRY SHORTCAKE

Serves 8

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| 1 | large egg |
| | milk (approx. 3/4 cup) |
| 2 cups | all-purpose flour |
| 1/4 cup | granulated sugar |
| 4 tsp | baking powder |
| 1/2 tsp | salt |
| 1/4 cup | cold butter, cubed |
| 4 cups | strawberries, washed and hulled |
| 2/3 cup | granulated sugar |
| | butter (approx. 2 tbsp), softened |
| 1 cup | whipping cream, whipped |

Prepare Sweet Tea Biscuit Dough

In measuring cup, beat egg. Add enough milk to make 1 cup; set aside.

In large bowl, whisk together flour, 1/4 cup sugar, baking powder and salt. Using fingertips or pastry blender, cut in cubed butter until mixture looks like fine crumbs. Add milk mixture to dry ingredients, stirring until mixture forms a ball (not too stiff or sticky).

On a floured surface, knead the dough slightly until smooth. Roll into a 1-inch thick, 9-inch circle. Place dough into greased 9-inch round cake pan. Bake at 425°F until golden brown, about 25 to 30 minutes. Turn out of pan and allow to cool completely.

Prepare the Fruit

Pick out 5 to 9 perfect berries; set aside. Slice remaining berries, add 2/3 cup sugar and mash slightly.

Assemble the Cake

Slice the cooled biscuit into 2 rounds. Place bottom layer on a serving plate. Spread with butter and cover with slightly mashed fruit. Replace top layer. Cover top with whipped cream and garnish with reserved whole strawberries.

Adapted from *Nellie Lyle Pattinson's Canadian Cook Book*, revised by Helen Wattie and Elinor Donaldson, Toronto, 1953.