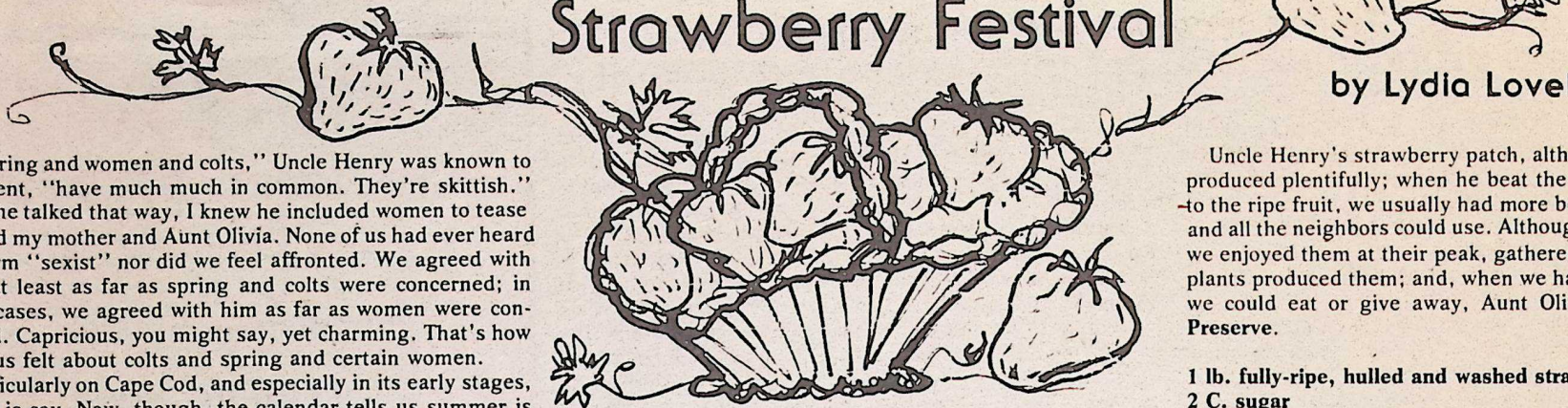


From Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

Strawberry Festival

by Lydia Lovell



"Spring and women and colts," Uncle Henry was known to comment, "have much much in common. They're skittish." When he talked that way, I knew he included women to tease me and my mother and Aunt Olivia. None of us had ever heard the term "sexist" nor did we feel affronted. We agreed with him, at least as far as spring and colts were concerned; in some cases, we agreed with him as far as women were concerned. Capricious, you might say, yet charming. That's how all of us felt about colts and spring and certain women.

Particularly on Cape Cod, and especially in its early stages, spring is coy. Now, though, the calendar tells us summer is about to arrive and push spring into the past. It's always at the very end that the vernal season comes into her own. She's a winsome lass, this year; her maturing has brought day after sunshiny day for our enjoyment.

Spring's maturity has brought us seasonal comestibles, as well, Asparagus, rhubarb, herring roe, fiddleheads, new peas, and now, strawberries. In earlier months, strawberries appearing on the Cape are trucked up from Florida. Of course, these new arrivals are welcome and good even though they may lack a certain strength of flavor, compared with our native berries. Home-grown ones are worth waiting for, despite their smaller size. Perhaps it is precisely their smaller size, in fact, that accounts for the difference in flavor. It's possible more flavor concentrates in the smaller fruit.

In Aunt Olivia's day, importing strawberries from any place farther afield than Wareham was unheard of; Cape Codders considered themselves blessed when a successful shipment of citrus fruit arrived from Florida. Native berries, then, were the only ones available. And then, as now, the month of June marked the height of the Cape's strawberry season. With the exception of those berries Aunt Olivia and other thrifty housewives preserved for use long after June gave way to summer and fall, Cape Codders took full advantage of fresh supplies while they lasted.

The very first strawberries to ripen were usually gobbled up as soon as picked. That was the only sensible thing to do. What, after all, is one to do with half-a-handful of strawberries? Certainly there's not enough to serve the family. And surely, they're too delicious to throw away. If you don't pick them in their prime, the birds will find them. Best thing's to eat them on the spot.

The first to ripen, however, were followed almost immediately by hundreds more; subsequent pickings found their way to the kitchen and were incorporated in tarts and pies and shortcakes and muffins and toppings and sauces and jams and preserves. Sometimes they seemed most appreciated served in combination with other fresh fruits, all tossed together in a deep crystal bowl, sweetened with their own juices. But then again, shortcake was a favorite dessert, and **Strawberry Pie** met with enthusiastic welcome whenever it appeared after dinner.

- 1 qt. fresh strawberries
- 1 C. sugar
- 3 T. cornstarch
- 1 T. lemon juice
- 1 baked pie shell
- Sweetened whipped cream

Although Aunt Olivia prepared her own pastry shell, you can shave many minutes from preparation time if you pick one up at the supermarket. You may wish to substitute half-a-dozen tart shells for one pie shell if you're not quite sure how many servings you will need.

Wash berries and hull them. Heap the choicest half of the whole fruit into the pie shell. Slice the remaining pint into a saucepan and stir gently while bringing to a boil. Add the sugar mixed with cornstarch. Stir in lemon juice. Simmer for about ten minutes, stirring often, until sauce thickens and clears. Allow to cool. Pour sauce over berries in pie shell. Chill for at least an hour. Top with whipped cream and serve.

There have been times, usually near the end of the strawberry season, when a quart of strawberries yielded a little more than a pint after being washed, hulled, and the over-ripe spots removed. To stretch a pint of fruit to serve six or eight people, Aunt Olivia's solution was often **Strawberry Cheese Cake**.

Freezing Strawberries

Strawberries are among the easiest fruits to freeze and store well if prepared correctly. Fruits to be frozen should be picked at the peak of quality with no bruises or soft spots. Freezing preserves good quality, but cannot improve fruit that is not perfect.

Wash the berries carefully under cool, running water, discarding any that are under- or over-ripe. Let the berries stand in a colander to drain while cutting them. Although berries may be frozen whole without sugar, best results are obtained when fruits are frozen in a sugar-based syrup.

Remove hulls, then slice smaller berries in half and larger berries in quarters and mash the berries lightly with a vegetable masher. This releases juices to produce syrup. For each quart of mashed strawberries, add 1/2 to 3/4 cup of sugar and mix lightly. Let stand five to ten minutes until syrup forms.

Strawberries freeze best in wide-mouth freezer jars, but may be frozen in plastic freezer containers or bags. When packing jars or containers, leave 1/2 inch headspace for expansion and be sure to cover the berries with syrup. Strawberries prepared correctly and kept frozen at 0° F will maintain good quality for up to one year.

Plan ahead for fall and winter eating pleasure by freezing local strawberries now. And, remember, for other food preservation questions contact Marilyn B. Lopes, Extension Home Economist, at the Cape Cod Extension Service, Deeds & Probate Building, Railroad Avenue, Barnstable, Mass. Phone 362-2511, ext. 201.

- 1 heaping C. crushed graham crackers
- 1/2 C. granulated sugar
- 1/2 C. melted margarine

Stir all together and press crumb crust into a pyrex dish about 8" square. Line the sides as well as the bottom.

- 1 8-oz. pkg. Philadelphia cream cheese
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 C. granulated sugar

Bring cream cheese to room temperature. Beat eggs. Beat the cream cheese until light. Blend in eggs and sugar; beat until smooth. Fold into the cream a pint of strawberries, cut in quarters. Heap into graham cracker crust. Bake at 350° for 20 minutes. Allow to cool at room temperature; do not refrigerate. When ready to serve, top with whipped cream for a delicious, rich dessert. This is a dish pretty enough to serve at a luncheon party.

Uncle Henry's strawberry patch, although not a large one, produced plentifully; when he beat the birds and chipmunks to the ripe fruit, we usually had more berries than our family and all the neighbors could use. Although the season is short, we enjoyed them at their peak, gathered them as long as the plants produced them; and, when we had more on hand than we could eat or give away, Aunt Olivia made **Strawberry Preserve**.

- 1 lb. fully-ripe, hulled and washed strawberries
- 2 C. sugar
- 1 C. water

In a saucepan, bring water to boil, add sugar, and stir until dissolved. Add the fruit and cook for 20 minutes until berries are tender. Pour into sterilized jars and seal. Simple, isn't it?

During the week that strawberries seemed to be occupying every bowl, basket and pan in our house, Uncle Henry could be counted upon to preserve **Strawberries in Wine**. For that very purpose, he had been husbanding a few fine bottles of Madeira wine and collecting a dozen or more pint mayonnaise jars at every opportunity all winter. Now he would choose the finest and largest of the berries and, after removing the stems carefully, fill his pint jars, packing the fruit closely but taking care not to bruise it. When the jars held all the berries he could tuck inside, he added to each one four heaping table-spoonsful of granulated sugar and then filled the jars, brimful, with Madeira wine and screwed the caps on firmly. He stored this delectable concoction on shelves he'd built at the rear of the root cellar. There they stayed cool even on August's hottest days. Uncle Henry's berries were shared only on special occasions...weddings, birthdays, and holiday parties. Delicious over ice cream!

Simple, quick and attractive (yet hardly a way to serve strawberries that can be described as ordinary) is a recipe Aunt Olivia declared was brought back to Cape Cod from California sometime during the last half of the 19th century after "Gold Fever" gave way to "Hankering for Home." Those prospecting members of the community who had sailed 'round the Horn seeking their fortunes during the Gold Rush returned little richer than when they had left. While they brought home no nuggets of gold, they did bring this recipe for **Strawberries San Francisco**.

- 1 C. dairy sour cream
- 1/2 C. half-and-half (light cream)
- 1 T. brown sugar
- 1 T. rum
- 1 T. orange liqueur
- 1 pint large ripe strawberries

In a bowl, stir together all ingredients except strawberries. Cover and keep at room temperature. Arrange washed and hulled whole berries in clear crystal stemmed goblets, parfait glasses, or dessert bowls. Chill. When ready to serve, spoon sauce over berries and present immediately to six grateful people.

Bon appetit.