Fresh apricot crisp

Queen of the apricots

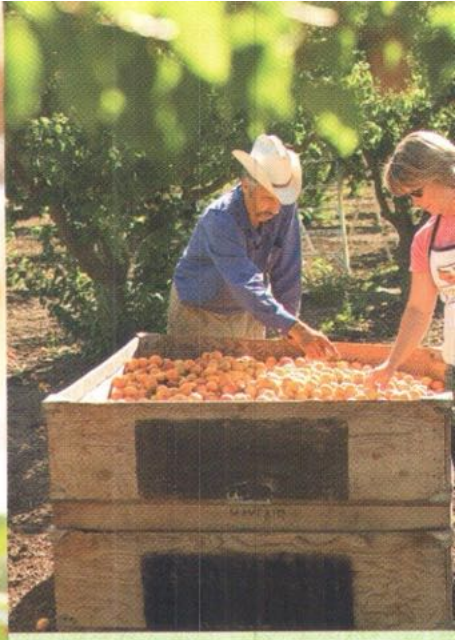
Tender, juicy, and tangy-sweet, the Blenheim makes summer cooking more luscious

BY MARGO TRUE PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS J. STORY

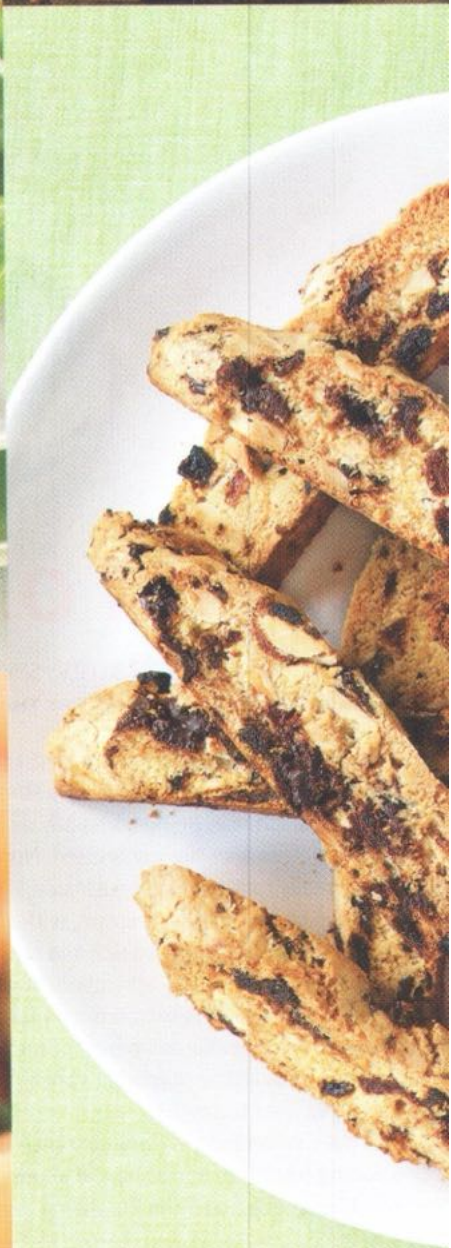
IT'S NOT THE MOST perfect-looking apricot, the Blenheim. Its thin skin sometimes has a greenish hue. Being unusually delicate, it's often also slightly bruised. None of this really matters. Because inside, it's the deep orange of a setting sun, with a silky texture and a taste so rich and tangy-sweet it makes ordinary apricots difficult to take seriously. This extraordinary flavor is what made the Blenheim (sometimes called the Royal) the dominant variety in California until the 1950s.

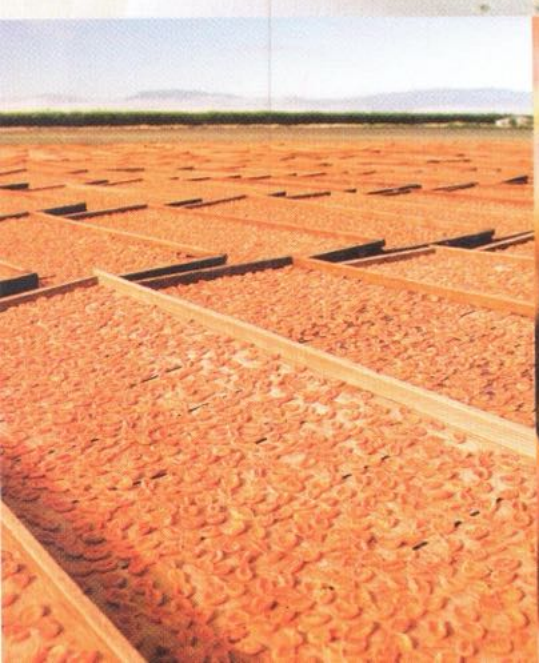
That's when modern long-distance shipping began to require harder, more durable varieties, and the Blenheim—so named because it was thought to have emerged from the gardens of England's Blenheim Palace—began to fade from the market shelves, replaced by bigger, tougher, rosy-cheeked apricots that usually have about as much flavor as ice plant. Most of our remaining Blenheims are grown in Northern and central California, and you can still find them fresh there during their brief season in late June and early July, mainly at farmers' markets.

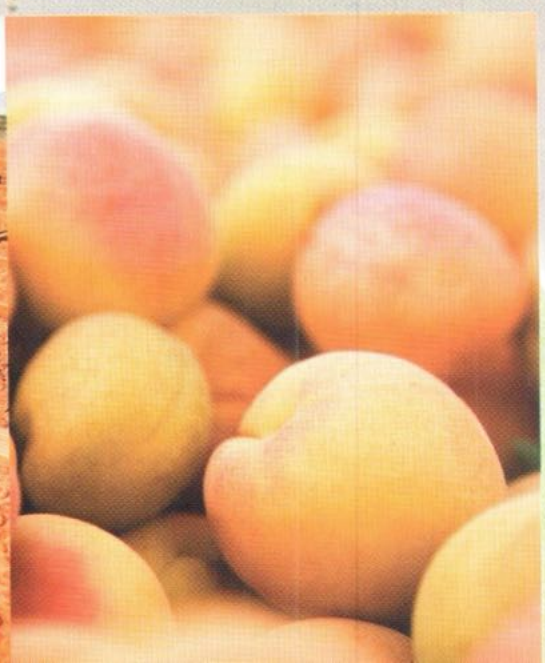
Or your can go straight to a farm itself. B&R Farms, a family operation in San Benito County, has been growing Blenheims since 1929, and owners Jim and Mari

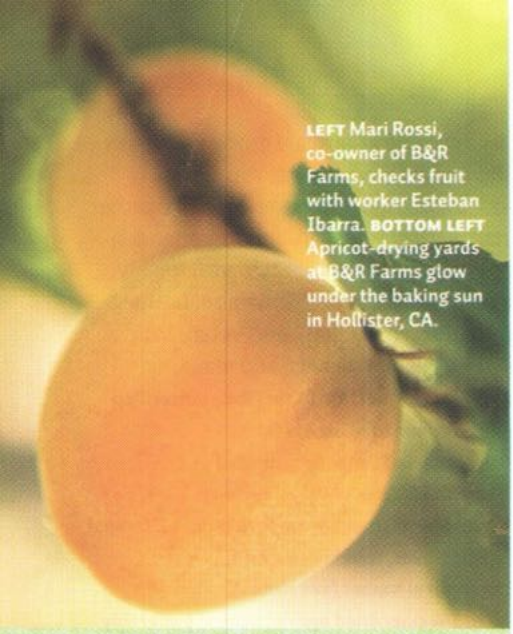


Chilled poached halibut with fresh apricot salsa









LEFT Mari Rossi, co-owner of B&R Farms, checks fruit with worker Esteban Ibarra. **BOTTOM LEFT** Apricot-drying yards at B&R Farms glow under the baking sun in Hollister, CA.

Apricot-chocolate-almond biscotti

FOOD STYLING, FROM TOP LEFT: KAREN SHINTO, DAN BECKER

Rossi welcome visitors. Mari knows that if enough people taste this fragile fruit, it might hang on: "Once you get ahold of a Blenheim, it completely changes your recipe." Most of B&R's apricots end up dried, their deliciousness made sturdier. But during harvest, you can buy them fresh from the farm's store if you call ahead. The second you step out of the car, you'll be wrapped in the perfume of warm, sweet, ripe apricots ... a prelude to the fruit itself.

INFO B&R Farms *(www.brfarms.com or 800/930-9168)* sells Blenheims on-site. Whole Foods Markets offers Blenheims in California, Nevada, and Arizona. Or order them by mail from Andy's Orchard *(from $50; www.andysorchard.com or 408/782-7600)*.

Fresh apricot crisp

A crunchy topping sets off Blenheims—so flavorful you don't have to add much to them.

PREP AND COOK TIME About 1 hour

MAKES 8 servings

NOTES If using supermarket apricots, cut each into quarters, increase lemon juice to 2 tbsp. and granulated sugar to ½ cup, and mix a pinch each of cinnamon, ginger, and nutmeg into the fruit before baking.

½ cup *each* butter and all-purpose flour
½ tsp. *each* ground cinnamon, ginger, and nutmeg
¼ tsp. *each* ground cloves and salt
⅓ cup packed dark brown sugar
⅔ cup quick-cooking rolled oats
⅓ cup golden raisins (optional)
⅓ cup chopped pecans
5 cups pitted and halved fresh apricots (preferably Blenheim; about 15 apricots)
1 tbsp. fresh lemon juice
¼ cup granulated sugar

1. Preheat oven to 350° and grease an 8- by 8-in. baking pan. Melt butter and let cool. Whisk together flour, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, cloves, salt, and brown sugar. Stir in oats, raisins (if using), and pecans, then stir in melted butter.

2. Toss apricots with lemon juice and granulated sugar and spread in baking pan. Squeeze topping into shaggy chunks and scatter over apricots. Bake until bubbling, 40 to 50 minutes; cool at least 30 minutes, and serve with vanilla ice cream.

PER SERVING 322 CAL., 45% (144 CAL.) FROM FAT; 3.7 G PROTEIN; 16 G FAT (7.8 G SAT.); 44 G CARBO (2.5 G FIBER); 78 MG SODIUM; 32 MG CHOL.

Chilled poached halibut with fresh apricot salsa

Mustard seeds give the salsa a nutty richness.

PREP AND COOK TIME 30 minutes

MAKES 4 servings

NOTES Find brown mustard seeds at Middle Eastern, South Asian, and gourmet grocery stores. If using supermarket apricots, increase lemon juice to 2½ tbsp. and mix it with 1½ tsp. honey before adding to salsa.

2 tbsp. vegetable oil
2 tsp. brown mustard seeds (see Notes)
1 lb. apricots, preferably Blenheim
2 tbsp. fresh lemon juice
½ cup diced red onion, rinsed and drained
¼ cup coarsely chopped fresh cilantro
¼ to ½ red jalapeño, stemmed, seeded, and cut into rings crosswise as thinly as possible, or ¼ to 1 tsp. minced seeded habanero chile
About 1 tbsp. coarse kosher salt, divided
½ lemon, cut into thin slices
4 halibut fillets (6 oz. each and ¾ in. thick)

1. Put oil and mustard seeds in a skillet, cover, and heat over medium-high heat. They'll start popping wildly. When the popping sounds die down, remove from heat. Let cool slightly, uncovered.

2. Halve and pit apricots; cut into ½-in. dice. Put diced apricots in a large bowl and toss gently with lemon juice, onion, cilantro, chile, and mustard seeds with oil. Stir in 2 tsp. salt and chill for at least 30 minutes and up to 2 hours.

3. Wipe skillet clean with paper towels and fill half-full with water. Add 1 tsp. salt and lemon slices. Heat water over medium heat until gently simmering. Add fish and cook, covered, until just opaque in center (cut to check), 5 to 8 minutes.

4. Transfer fish with a spatula to a platter and chill at least 20 minutes. Season with salt to taste and serve cold, with salsa.

PER SERVING 347 CAL., 39% (135 CAL.) FROM FAT; 38 G PROTEIN; 15 G FAT (1.9 G SAT.); 15 G CARBO (2 G FIBER); 586 MG SODIUM; 54 MG CHOL.

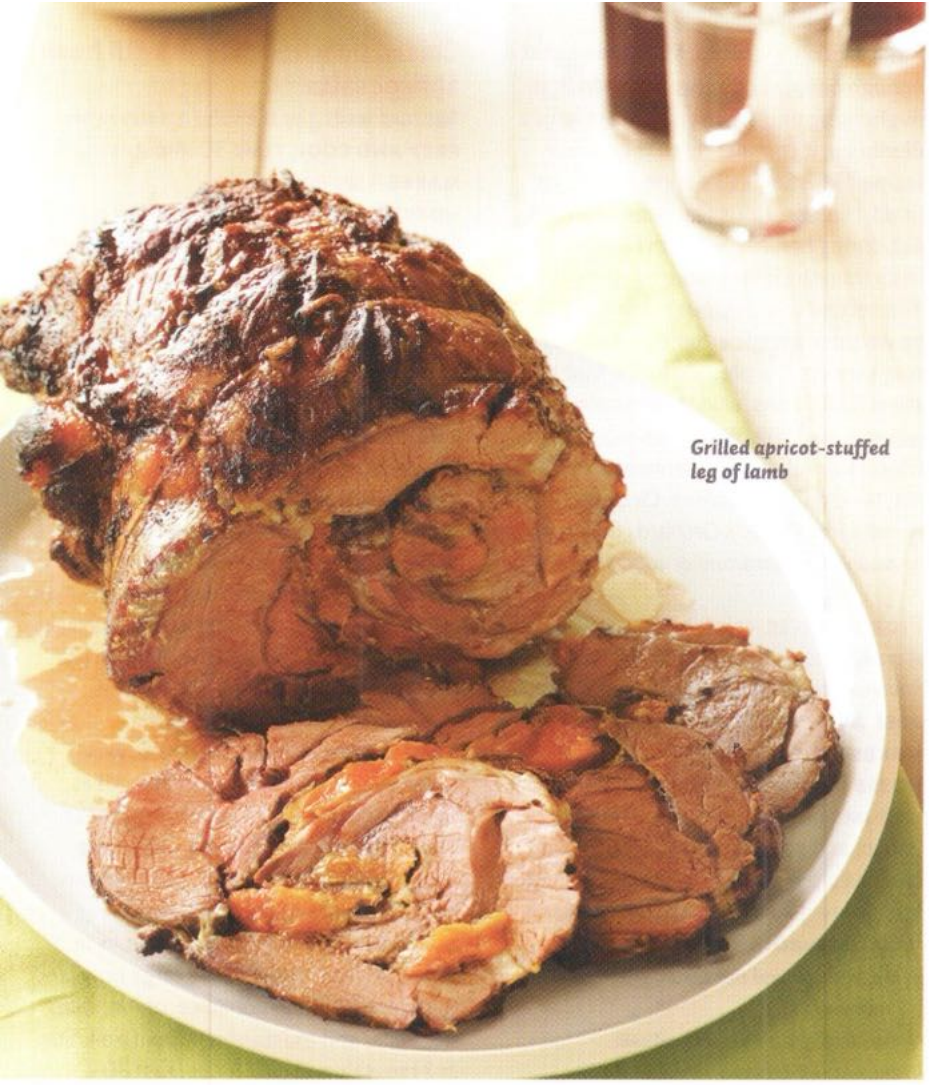
Apricot-chocolate-almond biscotti

These biscotti are crumbly delivery systems for chewy apricot bits, hunks of dark chocolate, and crunchy almonds.

PREP AND COOK TIME 1½ hours

MAKES About 2 dozen biscotti

1¾ cups flour
1 cup sugar



Grilled apricot-stuffed leg of lamb

½ tsp. baking powder
¼ tsp. salt
6 tbsp. unsalted butter, melted and cooled
½ tsp. vanilla
2 eggs
¾ cup diced dried apricots, preferably Blenheim
⅔ cup slivered almonds
4 oz. chopped bittersweet chocolate

1. Preheat oven to 350° and line a large baking sheet with parchment paper. In a food processor, pulse flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt 5 to 6 times to blend. In a small bowl, whisk together melted butter, vanilla, and eggs; add to flour mixture and pulse 10 to 12 times to form a dough.

2. Turn dough out into a large mixing bowl. Add apricots, almonds, and chocolate, and stir to mix thoroughly.

3. Put dough on baking sheet and form into two 12-in.-long loaves. Flatten tops slightly and bake until loaves are golden but give slightly when pressed, 25 to 30 minutes.

4. Remove loaves from oven and reduce temperature to 325°. Let loaves cool 5 minutes, then cut on the diagonal into ½- to ¾-in.-thick slices. Arrange slices flat on baking sheet and bake until lightly browned, 10 to 15 minutes. Cool completely on racks.

PER BISCOTTI 152 CAL., 41% (62 CAL.) FROM FAT; 2.7 G PROTEIN; 6.9 G FAT (3 G SAT.); 21 G CARBO (0.8 G FIBER); 41 MG SODIUM; 25 MG CHOL.

Grilled apricot-stuffed leg of lamb

The dried apricots swell and soften with the Moroccan-spiced juices of the roasting lamb.

PREP AND COOK TIME About 3 hours, plus at least 6 hours marinating time

MAKES 8 to 10 servings

NOTES *Ras el hanout* is a Moroccan spice mix available at upscale grocery stores or Middle Eastern markets. You can make your own blend, if you like: Whisk together 1 tsp. *each* ground cardamom, coriander, ginger, and turmeric; ½ tsp. *each* freshly ground black pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, and saffron (optional); and ¼ tsp. *each* ground allspice, cloves, and mace.

1 boneless leg of lamb (4 to 5 lbs.) butterflied and trimmed of excess fat
1 tbsp. coarse kosher salt, divided
½ cup plus 3 tbsp. olive oil, divided
2 small onions, roughly chopped (about 2½ cups)
5 garlic cloves, roughly chopped
2 tbsp. *ras el hanout* (see Notes)
1¼ to 1¾ cups dried apricot halves, preferably Blenheim

1. Unfold lamb, rinse, and pat dry. Slash ½-in.-deep cuts about 1 in. apart all over both sides of lamb. Season all over with 1½ tsp. salt. Put in a baking dish just large enough to hold meat when unfolded.

2. Pour ½ cup water and ½ cup olive oil into a blender; add onions, garlic, *ras el hanout*, and remaining 1½ tsp. salt. Pulse to blend into a loose paste and pour over lamb. Cover and refrigerate at least 6 hours or up to 1 day. Let lamb come to room temperature before grilling, about 45 minutes.

3. Prepare a gas grill for indirect heat: Turn all burners to high and close lid. When temperature reaches 325° to 350°, turn off one of the burners, creating an indirect heat area, and adjust burners to maintain temperature. Or preheat oven to 325°.

4. Wipe marinade off lamb and arrange apricot halves in a single layer over meat, leaving about a ½-in. border on all sides. Roll up meat jelly-roll style and tie tightly with kitchen twine. Trim off ends of twine. Rub lamb with remaining olive oil. If cooking on grill, oil grill well with oil-soaked paper towels.

5. Grill lamb over indirect heat area or roast in oven, set in a V-rack in a large roasting pan. Cook meat, turning over once halfway through, until an instant-read thermometer registers 140° for medium-rare, 1½ to 2½ hours. Let lamb rest, covered with foil, 15 to 20 minutes. Slice and serve.

PER SERVING 390 CAL., 37% (144 CAL.) FROM FAT; 44 G PROTEIN; 16 G FAT (4.8 G SAT.); 16 G CARBO (2 G FIBER); 431 MG SODIUM; 135 MG CHOL. ■