

Tropical Fruit Series

Introducing Pastry Students to:

Mamey



Tropical fruits are often unfamiliar to my students, but for me, they are like a return to my youth. The dazzling colors and unexpected combinations of flavors are part of my overall approach to developing plated desserts and other pastry specialties. I also like to make use of what I know of the fruit's history to get new ideas or to try to recreate some of the possibilities that have stood the test of time.

Originating in Southeast Mexico, the mamey (*Pouteria sapota*, also referred to as mamee or sapote mamey) belongs to the same family (the Sapotaceae) as the sapote Domingo and the green sapote. The Arawaks who inhabited the Caribbean Islands are believed to have included mamey in their diets along with other native fruits and vegetables such as papaya, squash, yams, and pineapple. The seed of the mamey was sometimes used to flavor the chocolate drink favored by Mayans. The fruit was recorded as growing near Darién, Panama, in 1514, and in 1529 was included by Oviedo in his review of the fruits of the New World.

The mamey is the finest fruit of this family. They are grown in Mexico, Central America, parts of South America, some islands of the Caribbean like Cuba and Puerto Rico, and, thankfully, now in South Florida by the **South Florida Tropical Fruit Growers Association**. Thanks to their efforts, we can enjoy them today in the United States.

Description

These fruits are football-shaped and are usually 5 to 10 inches long and 3 to 5 inches wide. They can weigh up to 4 pounds. Mamey is delicate and, therefore, can be difficult to transport. It is quite easy to bruise the delicate flesh should it be bumped in transit. The red to brown skin is almost like fuzzy sand paper and is very easy to remove. Smaller fruits usually contains a single, large, oval seed but larger fruits may have up to four. The seed has a shiny, hard, dark brown surface with a light brown scar (hilum) on the one side.

The flavor of a ripe mamey is unique and has been described as having apricot notes, a touch of sweet potato and persimmon, and a little hint of nuts and spices. The flesh can range from yellow to salmon to pumpkin orange, even all the way up to a deep red flesh, which is a feature that not many other fruits can claim. The fruit's color is already very intense, even when simply sliced. In fact, a very simple and effective way to feature fresh mamey is to use it in a fresh fruit tart. A glaze will embellish the color and texture of the fruit making it hard for anyone to resist trying it. In addition to their brilliant color and exotic flavors, mamey has a texture that is silky and luscious, like an avocado. The fruit feels rich and creamy when eaten.

Selecting and Handling Mamey

The mamey is harvested from May to September. Different varieties are harvested at different times throughout the growing season.

An important note of caution about mamey: It is important to eat them only when they are completely ripe, otherwise they can be astringent. A good way to determine if a mamey is ready to eat is to scratch off a bit of the skin closest to the stem. The flesh underneath should not appear green, an indication that the fruit isn't ripe yet. Look for a reddish color. When you

press gently against the fruit's flesh, you will note that a ripe mamey feel firms, although not hard. It should be easy to mash, like a ripe avocado texture.

Some cultures traditionally take steps to lessen bitterness in the fruit. In Jamaica, cooks steep the fruit in wine and sugar. In the Bahamas, they let the flesh stand in lightly salted water "to remove the bitterness" before they cook it with copious amounts of sugar and simmering to a jam-like consistency.

Uses and Applications

I personally love this fruit. It reminds me of my childhood in Mexico, having a *Licuada de Mamey con Nuez*: a mamey-and-pecan milkshake that was sold in the sidewalks in downtown Mexico City. (In my opinion, this presentation of mamey is hard to beat!) This is a fruit that can be eaten raw or featured fresh in a tart. Mamey can also be pureed and made in to a mousse, an aerated frozen dessert, or ice cream. Knowing that those presentations are all delicious, one begins to wonder: Why not in a custard or a soufflé?

What about adding flavors? Mamey pairs well with nuts like almonds or pecans, coconut, sweet potato, orange, lemon, banana, black persimmon, rum, cinnamon, nutmeg, chocolate, honey, coffee, and vanilla, as well as other tropical fruits.

The mamey is widely made into preserves such as spiced marmalade and pastes (resembling guava paste) and used as a filler for products made of other fruits. Slightly under-ripe fruits, rich in pectin, are made into jelly. Wine is made from the fruit and fermented "toddy" from the sap of the tree in Brazil. In the Dominican Republic, the uncooked flesh, blended with sugar, is made into frozen sherbet. The juice or syrup of stewed flesh is seasoned with sugar and lemon juice to make "mamey-ade".

A few tips:

When cooking the flesh for any purpose, skim off any foam that forms on the surface of the water, as this is usually bitter.

Be careful when puréeing this fruit because of the high amount of gums the fruit contains. Clean and rinse the blades of your mixer, blender, or food processor to keep them moving freely.

Nutrition

This fruit is not only delicious but it is also very nourishing. In 1903, Cook and Collins recorded in a botanical publication: “It was this fruit that kept Cortez and his army alive on their famous march from Mexico to Honduras.” Mamey sapote is high in vitamins A and C as well as in potassium as well as being an excellent source of dietary fiber. One cup of mamey sapote contains approximately 135 calories.

Exploring Mamey with My Students

Normally, in my class my students are adventurous when it comes to exploring new foods and coming up with new ideas for desserts. They have not yet become stuck in a comfort zone. Since they aren’t hemmed in by tradition, their fresh and unencumbered approach can result in some amazing ideas. As an instructor, I relish the opportunity to introduce as many new tropical fruits to my students as possible. I want to encourage them to work with these fruits to develop their own recipes and presentations.

My class is the last classroom setting for the students of the baking and pastry AOS program at The Culinary Institute of America. From my bakeshop, they go on to work in the college’s various restaurants, and ultimately, they graduate. I view my class as their opportunity

to extend their product knowledge and reassert their skills using all of the different techniques they have learned in other classes.

What makes these tropical fruits interesting from a pastry chef's perspective is the challenge of enhancing their delicate flavors without overwhelming them. And that challenge is one that I believe my students are ready to tackle. To that end, I created a specific activity to introduce them to the fruit. A main objective of this is to guide them to an understanding and appreciation of these fruits and the incredible potential they have on the pastry menu.

The objective of this activity is to develop desserts from scratch with fresh tropical fruits--in this case mamey--using any of the techniques learned they have learned in this and previous classes--poaching, braising baking, and so forth. I encourage them to use any of the different sauces methods as well as frozen options--granites, sorbet, ice cream and frozen aerated desserts.

The class is divided into teams in this project. The timeline is 3 hours. At the end of that time, the different teams present their creation with a brief explanation of the techniques they used and the reasoning behind their choices. They receive feedback from three chef/instructors.

The desserts the students create will be judged according to the following standards:

- Includes a creative characteristic or aspect
- Produced in a professional manner
- Accurate work (using a game plan)
- Ability to analyze and explain your dessert, supported by research

Students may use various techniques in order to combine sapote mamey with other ingredients to create a delightful experience for the senses. Their work may fall within the following categories: a pastry, as a light bite, a more sophisticated treat, or a plated dessert. Each team is allowed to choose different products to use in combination with the mamey. They may choose to use the ingredients and flavors mentioned in our classroom discussion as an element in the dessert or as a part of the overall composition of the dessert plate. They can use whatever tools they want from the bakeshop (and I mean *any*).

On the day of the challenge, we come into the bakeshop, ready to begin. It's the morning, and the students are getting their fruit and are preparing their stations.

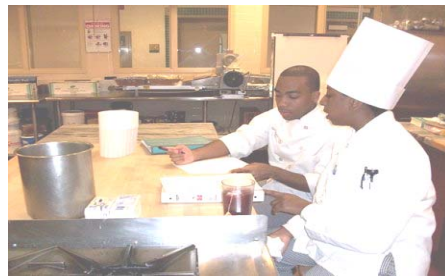


The three-hour window for the students opens. The time is on, and the students are quiet, going into a familiar work mode: deep concentration as they work out the way they want to tackle this creative project. I can watch them trying to

figure out this amazing, different, and delicious new fruit. Their projects are going in several different directions. Walking between the teams, I can see and hear that one team is planning to make a custard, another an ice cream, and still others discuss preparing a mousse.



At this point, I can tell that they are starting to pick up on the special qualities of this fruit and are actively looking for ways to capitalize on its consistency and texture, its mild aroma and subtle flavor, and the number of possible combinations with other ingredients. When I look from station to station, I can see rum, bourbon, orange, cucumbers, yogurt, and maple syrup.



I also see varying levels of confidence in my students. Some are still wondering which direction to head while others have a very clear idea and are losing no time. Their minds are working in high gear and that is the greatest part. I love their questions:

“Chef is there an enzyme in the fruit?”

“Does it curdle when heated?”

“Is the color going to fade out?”

We talk and consider. I try to get the message across to be careful with the spices, subtlety is the right approach. This is not always easy to make clear to them; cinnamon is a great spice but it seems that it is overused by students more often than not. Developing the complete

flavor of the dish is the most challenging part of any creation. First comes the taste and flavor of the fruit and the overall dish, next comes the attention to getting textures and temperatures right, and finally, the presentation!



The clock is ticking down the hours. Only one and a half hours left. I am listening in on some of the discussions; a few of them “out there” and some are more heated than others. Their

skills are betraying them up, even basic ones. *"I messed up the crème anglaise!"* And so, I try to talk them off the ledge:

- Make it again
- Pay attention while you work.
- Don't let things go too far before you make corrections.
- Do not discard anything until you are done; you never know what you can make use of.

Now, the pressure is really on; there is only 20 minutes to go. It is time to make decisions, there is no more time to go back and try again. Now, I hear discussions about the plating begin.

Should we make quenelles or use scoops?

Is the mousse going to set enough so we can take it out of the mold? Did we remember to oil the molds?

Finally their time is up. Most of them are finished with only a few little details left to attend to here and there. As they are clearing their stations, the three chef/judges are coming in the door: Chef Thomas Vaccaro, Chef Dieter Schorner, and Chef Dianne Rossomando are here and standing by. The presentation the table is set up and Team 2 is the first to present their plate.



Feedback from the chefs started to flow and the final products for all the other teams all began to arrive. The results were great. We tasted different mousses, ice creams, truffles, custards, tarts, sauces, and more.



By the end of the class session, all the teams had presented their work to the chef/judges and overall the students did well. They performed at the level of professionalism I expected from them. They employed several techniques and applied their knowledge with accuracy and creativity. The activity was a hit. Students came away from the exercise with an increased appreciation for a wonderful and amazing fruit that many of them had never held or tasted before. They got to try out the lessons they learned in previous classes in order to come up with a new and creative presentation worthy of a fine restaurant.

“I really enjoyed working with the fruit. It was delicious, I can only hope to run across it in my career,” was Joshua Creed’s opinion.

“I feel very lucky to try this great fruit,” said Katerina Verganelakis.

“Working with the mamey fruit was a pleasure,” added Jaquila Foster.

Not only was this exercise fun for the students because it reminded them of the “quickfire” challenges on competitive cooking shows, it was a great way to encourage them to stretch themselves. The judges and I both looked for an expression of each student’s pastry knowledge and skills as well as the application of the knowledge they gained about the fruit itself: its texture, flavor, and other characteristics.



What We Learned:

Holding and Ripening Mamey: The mamey traveled fairly well from Florida to the CIA. It was already in the process of ripening when it arrived in Hyde Park, so most of the fruit was kept in the walk-in for the six days between their arrival and the class activity. Some were kept at room temperature in the bakeshop. By the day of the activity, they were all ripe and ready.

I noticed a few of them with unripe spots that needed to be removed. All of the fruits had a nice and regular color to flesh which was very shiny and without any brown spots, which can be an issue with some types of mamey.

Pureeing Mamey: We learned that the mamey can be pureed more easily for **immediate consumption** when it is pureed with some water. It doesn't lose much flavor and the color just lightens a little.

Adding Sweeteners to Mamey: Mamey is a sweet fruit, sensitive to additional sugar; sweeteners of any sort should be added with care and precision.

Adding Spices to Mamey: While cinnamon does go well with mamey, it is so strong that it can very easily overpower the delicate flavor of the mamey.

Baking Mamey: When baked the intensity of its flavor diminished so the quantities of sweeteners should be adjusted and the amount of spices reduced.

Fresh Mamey: When used fresh in a mousse, an ice cream or a foam, the flavor holds up and comes through with no problem; adding just a little acid rounds out the flavor.

Mamey with Chocolate: The ganache made with milk chocolate worked very well, the delicate flavor was subtle but definite. The truffles made in class were very interesting and a *must-do-again*.

Sautéing Mamey: Sautéing mamey works fantastically; it intensified the flavor. The caramelized exterior of the sautéed fruit gave the presentation a very special character, proving that bitter flavors do pair with mamey.

Mamey in a Fruit Sauce: As a coulis, mamey produces a sauce with a color so bright that it enhances any given dessert. Its texture makes it easy to plate.

Mamey Sorbet: Finally a sorbet made with pureed mamey (watered down a bit as described above) with a very small jet of lemon juice taken to 28 brix was amazing. The great mouthfeel

reminded me of persimmons, with a fresh flavor, a mild carrotty aftertaste and an amazing color.

Conclusion

Mamey is a fruit that should be more widely represented on dessert menus. This classroom exercise had the desired effect of giving students a richer, more rewarding educational experience. They used both practical skills and creative skills. I will most certainly be looking to repeat the mamey project with my students and hope to be able to provide it as a stepping stone toward the most effective possible education for all future pastry chefs.

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