

Clementines

Not Just for Snacking

BY RUTH LIVELY

How to pick and store

You'll find clementines from October through February. Choose fruits that are intact and firm, heavy for their size, and deeply colored. But don't avoid fruits that have a slight green cast—they'll color quickly. Stored at room temperature with good air circulation, clementines keep several days to a week. Turning them and, even more important, keeping a little space between fruits, helps prevent mold from setting in. For longer keeping, stash them in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator.

I like all kinds of fruit, but when it comes to citrus, clementines are—well, yes—my darlings. These diminutive fruits have a thin skin that peels off easily, making them ideal for a quick mid-afternoon snack. I love their juicy, sweet flesh, which is just a little more acidic than that of oranges, and their wonderful floral scent.

By most accounts, clementines are the result of a cross between a mandarin and an orange that occurred at the beginning of the 20th century in the Algerian garden of a French missionary, Clement Rodier. Virtually unknown in this country 25 years ago, clementines are now the most popular mandarin-type citrus on the market. Much of the world production is concentrated in Spain and Morocco (South Africa and Israel are also big producers), but more and more citrus farms in California are being converted from oranges to clementines. Most of the

clementines available in the United States are rather small, but larger varieties exist.

Use the whole fruit

Although snacking on ripe clementines dripping with juice is one of the best things winter can offer, this fruit is wonderful in recipes, too. As with other citrus, the flesh, the juice, and the zest can all contribute their delicious perfumed flavor to a dish.

I use the zest and juice in sauces for meat or fish and in braises. Or I use them to make refreshing clementine sorbets or granitas (see the recipe at right). A little zest gives a tantalizing flavor to vinaigrettes, homemade garlic mayonnaise, and marinades for meat, and it adds zing to a boring bowl of supermarket olives.

Sectioned or sliced clementines are a fresh addition to winter salads. They are also lovely poached, used as a tart topping, or in a compote with other fruit.

Savory ways with clementines

Make a tempting winter salad of endive, frisée, or radicchio (or a mix), and clementine sections and toss with a vinaigrette made with a little clementine juice. Top with a thin slab of Roquefort and some toasted almonds.

For a tangy clementine sauce, simmer and reduce clementine juice by half, add just a touch of white wine vinegar and a little lemon juice. Season and serve over steamed vegetables, such as asparagus or artichokes.

Jazz up a salad of bulgur, orzo, or wild rice with chopped clementines, scallions, toasted pecans, and lots of parsley. Dress it with a vinaigrette made with olive oil and lemon and clementine juices.

Give an unexpected twist to a pot roast or braised short ribs by adding the juice of one clementine and a little grated zest when you begin the braise.

Perk up winter squash or red pepper soup with clementine juice and grated zest.

They're great in desserts, too

For a sweet garnish, poach clementine sections and zest in a heavy syrup of 2 parts sugar to 1 part water until soft and tender, then cool and store in the syrup. Use as a garnish for cheesecake or a dense chocolate cake.

Try a warm gratin of clementines with zabaglione. Pour a Grand Marnier-flavored zabaglione (custard sauce) over clementine sections in a shallow ovenproof dish and run under the broiler for a few minutes to brown the top.

For a zesty compote, simmer clementine sections with pear and apple slices in a light syrup of 1 part sugar to 2 parts water (perhaps using white or sweet wine for part of the liquid), a vanilla bean, star anise or cardamom, and a strip of clementine zest, until the fruit is tender. Let cool in the syrup. Serve with pound cake or over vanilla ice cream.

Make a citrusy upside-down cake using clementine sections. Add a little zest to the batter, if you wish.