

Colin Moody
The Happy Palate



**VERSATILE,
TASTY FIGS**

I love this time of year. I know the produce world is peaking when figs are in town. You can do so much with figs. If you have not had the joy of biting into a fresh fig, this is the time to do it (August-October). Ninety percent of all figs get dried after they are harvested; because they are relatively delicate (figs only hold for three days in your refrigerator). Make sure they are soft to the touch before you dive into them.

There are more than 600 varieties of figs worldwide. Originally from Asia Minor, figs were the first-ever cultivated fruits. The most common type of figs in the American market are the black Mission, brown Turkish, white-green Kadota and green-gold Calmyrna.

They are rich in iron, calcium, potassium and, most importantly, dietary fiber, which, according to many health organizations, may be beneficial in reducing the risk of heart disease and some types of cancer. Most Americans don't even get half of the recommended amount of fiber (25-30grams). And figs are a tasty way to get them, at 5 grams per serving.

I used to live next to a sweet older couple who would wake me up at 7 a.m. each morning with a bell they had rigged to a pull-string in their fig tree. They constantly had to scare away the birds from the ripe figs hanging on the tree. That may not seem early to most, but when you are working at a restaurant until 11 p.m. every night, it sure seemed early to me. But that unwanted wake-up call was usually cured by the offering of fresh figs from them.

Add fresh figs to your fruit salad, cereal or yogurt. Cut them in half, skewer and garnish a summer drink. Use them as a quick appetizer at a party. Simply wrap with bacon, and bake them at 380 degrees for approximately 10 minutes (or until bacon is done) and you've got "figs in a blanket." Quarter them up, toss with a little sugar (or, even better, lavender honey) and lemon, let rest in the fridge for 30 minutes (macerate) and put over ice cream, or cottage cheese (oh, yeah!).

They are flexible and fun. Here are a couple of my favorite recipes for fresh figs. Dried figs are a completely different ball game. I will talk about them during the winter when we delve into dried figs.

Wild rice salad with figs
(Yield: 6 servings)

3 cups wild rice, cooked according to package directions
1 cup fresh figs, 1/2 inch dice (stems removed)
1/4 cup chopped pecans, pistachios or almonds
1/2 cup golden raisins (may substitute regular raisins)
1/4 cup orange juice
2 T. finely grated orange peel
1/4 cup nonfat yogurt
1 T. white balsamic vinegar (may substitute regular balsamic)
1/4 cup peanut oil, or light olive oil
Sea salt and white pepper to taste

Steps: In a large mixing bowl combine the wild rice with the figs, nuts of your choice and raisins. Set aside. In a medium mixing bowl whisk together the orange juice, grated peel, yogurt, balsamic vinegar and oil. Pour over the rice and stir to blend flavors. Add salt and pepper to taste. Mix well and allow to stand for two hours, or overnight, in your refrigerator.

Serve on its own as a light summer lunch, or with grilled chicken for a patio dinner.

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The Mission fig has purple skin and is high in fiber. The golden Calmyrna fig is a little nutty when it comes to flavor.

Monterey County Taste

www.montereyherald.com

Inside

Fish on the grill
Done right, the skin is crisp and nearly blackened with the flesh moist and sweet.
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D



Culinary adventures aboard the June Hong Chian Lee on the Andaman Sea near the island of Phuket, Thailand

Junk food

MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

The converted Chinese junk June Hong Chian Lee under sail on the Andaman Sea.

By **MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ** and **JULIO RAMIREZ**
Herald Correspondents

Traveling to southern Thailand in search of a whale shark, we arrive on Phuket island to meet our dive boat, a converted Chinese junk, the June Hong Chian Lee, an all-teak sailing ship that once ran coal (and contraband) from Burma to Malaysia and now carries divers on the Andaman Sea.

Phuket is a varied paradise. In the countryside, cicadas boom in the trees calling for rain; their prayers are answered in the afternoon by showers, followed by rainbows arching behind backlit clouds. Palms and multicolored bougainvilleas cluster around family compounds; children playing in doorways smile at passers-by.

In Phuket town, the busy streets are filled with the noise of scooters and tuk-tuks (motorized



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

pedicabs). The marketplace is animated by bargaining, gossip and vendors displaying fresh vegetables, fruits, curries, spices, live animals and fish still swimming in buckets of water. Each morning we head to the

market, Julio carrying his all-purpose eating utensil — a pocketknife — to breakfast that consists of mangoes, pineapples, rambutan and pomelos; gregarious vendors offer us samples of unfamiliar fruits such as jackfruit and mangosteen and then show us how to eat them. We sip fresh watermelon juice and papaya smoothies, and devour miniature steamed buns and tiny coconut pancakes.

Phuket's cuisine reflects the island's multicultural heritage: Thai, Malay and Chinese. In the evening, the air is heavy with humidity, the scent of cooking oil and the fragrant aromas of Southern Thai cuisine: coconut milk, tamarind, garlic, chiles, coriander, cilantro, lemon grass, kafir lime, fish sauce, basil and shrimp paste. Street-side restaurants and food stalls serve steaming bowls of stir-fries,

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Above: The cook in the galley of the junk, deep-frying a seafood tempura for lunch. Right: Julio Ramirez inquires about cashew apples (known as marañón in Latin America) in a produce market in Phuket.



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

About the authors

Julio Ramirez and Marie Perucca-Ramirez, creators of the Fishwife Seafood Restaurants and Turtle Bay Taquerias on the Monterey Peninsula, sold their restaurants last year to start The Food Wranglers Inc., a restaurant consultant group.

Julio is certified as an executive chef by the American Culinary Federation



and in 1999 was inducted into the prestigious American Academy of Chefs. Marie is a writer with a degree in history and sociology and a master's in applied linguistics.

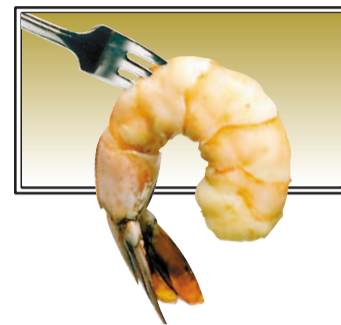
The couple have always enjoyed traveling the back roads of the world; they are interested in seeing what other ethnic groups grow, what they eat, how they prepare

their food — what their various cultures "taste like."

During their travels they have met many remarkable individuals, had a number of unusual experiences, eaten a variety of unfamiliar foods — and collected some great recipes they have adapted for home use. Once a month they will share their experiences — through words and photos — with Herald readers. Write to them at marie@foodwranglers.com.

Good to know

What's cooking?



Quick fix

Shrimp gazpacho
(Serves 2)

Gazpacho, a Spanish soup served at room temperature or chilled, makes a perfect dinner for a hot summer evening. Adding cooked shrimp creates a complete one-dish meal without turning on the stove. And buying peeled, cooked shrimp makes this a 10-minute meal.

1 cup low-sodium tomato juice
1 cup diced ripe tomato
1/2 cup diced Vidalia or red onion
1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons diced cucumber
2 tsp. olive oil
2 tsp. balsamic vinegar
1 cup nonfat, plain yogurt
Salt and fresh-ground pepper
1/4 lb. cooked shrimp
2 scallions, sliced

Steps: Divide tomato juice, tomatoes, onion and 1/4 cup cucumber between 2 large soup bowls. Divide olive oil, balsamic vinegar and yogurt between the bowls. Stir. Add salt and pepper to taste. Divide shrimp between the bowls and top with scallions and remaining 2 tablespoons cucumber.

— Linda Gassenheimer's Web site is www.DinnerInMinutes.com.

Tips

Managing melons

If the watermelon you picked up at the market is not quite as juicy and full-flavored as you hoped, don't panic. While it's not going to ripen further once picked (that's why picking a good melon is paramount), a small sprinkling of salt — kosher salt is fine, but large-crystal sea salt is better — will sharpen the flavors and add a delicate crunch. Salt your melon immediately before you plan to eat it; too soon, and it will begin to lose moisture. To choose a good melon, look for evenly-sized, large melons with no cracks or pitting. They should smell fragrant, and the stem end should be indented.

— www.foodnetwork.com

On the Web

- **The site:** www.razzledazzlerecipes.com
- **What's there:** This cute site is loaded with recipes, including some for camping, homemade ice cream, barbecue and canning. You can search by recipe or ingredient. You can even search for restaurant recipes. The site is very well-organized and easy to move around.
- **A sample:** Delicious food gifts from your own kitchen. Recipes for mixes, mixes in a jar, breads, fudge, gourmet popcorn, candy, truffles, cakes, muffins, pancakes and more. Who wouldn't love an edible hostess gift made just for them?

GO! out

16th Annual NatureSweet Carmel TomatoFest. 12:30-4:30 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 16 at Quail Lodge Resort, 8205 Valley Greens Drive, Carmel Valley. Tasting of more than 350 heirloom tomato varieties, 200 wines from California and gourmet tomato entrées created by leading chefs. \$95 general/ages 12 and under free with a ticketed adult. (800) 965-4827, www.tomatofest.com.

All about wine

Our online wine expert George Edwards of WineMarket in Pacific Grove writes about the Rhone varietal Grenache. Read Edwards' columns or ask him a wine-related question of your own. Go to www.montereyherald.com, click on columnists and find "All About Wine."

— Herald staff reports and wire services

TASTE

Andaman Sea

From page D1

curries, noodles and soups. Open-air restaurants barbecue lobsters, whelks and crabs — all fresh from the Andaman Sea. Unpretentious restaurants with folding chairs and plastic tablecloths serve dishes such as crispy garlic shrimp with a sweet and spicy dipping sauce, chicken in pandanus leaves and deep-fried fish. Add a cold Singha beer: the perfect meal!

We board our dive boat late one afternoon and set sail for the Similan Islands as the sun is painting the sky with the purple, peach and flamingo palette of the tropics. The deck is warm under our bare feet, and the breeze balmy, as the crew sets off firecrackers in the Chinese tradition to wish us a propitious voyage.

On the altar, set in the prow of the ship, offerings are made to appease the gods of the sea: fresh fruits, incense, leis of orchids and marigold, and nine

cups of tea — one for each crew member. The junk's name, June Hong Chian Lee, translates to "Respect Wind Travel Forever," and with her Chinese-orange sails unfurled, her three tall masts towering over us, it is easy to imagine a time in the not-so-distant past when wind controlled the traffic on the sea.

The 10 divers aboard the junk are a multinational group from six nations; our dive masters ex-pats from England and Holland; the crew Thai and Chinese. We are a diverse group that will become, at least for a brief time, a family living in close quarters, joined by a love of the sea and a passion for diving.

As dawn breaks over the Andaman Sea, the junk's dragon heads begin to glow as they are touched by the rising sun. The hardworking crew is already up readying the dive gear, while Mr. Chin, sacred Buddhist texts and symbols tattooed over every part of his body, supervises the sails and ropes, and the cook works his magic in the galley. The bell summons the divers to



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

A variety of curries, deep-fried metas and stir-fries are set out for the divers aboard the June Hong Chian Lee.

(recipe follows).

Sweet and spicy dipping sauce
(Makes about 1 cup)
This dipping sauce is wonderful with other types of seafood and tempura dishes.

½ cup rice vinegar
½ cup sugar
1 tsp. minced garlic
5 serrano or Thai chiles, minced
2 green onions (scallions), minced
1 T. chopped fresh cilantro
Steps: Heat the vinegar, sugar, garlic, and chiles in a small saucepan over high heat. Bring the liquid to a boil; remove from heat. Allow the mixture to cool for 10 minutes. Add the green onions and cilantro. Cool to room temperature and serve. Refrigerate in an airtight nonreactive container for up to 2 weeks.

Spare ribs braised in honey, garlic and ginger sauce
(Serves 4)

These ribs made aboard the June Hong Chian Lee are wonderfully messy and tasty; everyone on the junk loved them. The combination of sea air and a day of fantastic diving only made them even more delicious. These would be a guaranteed hit at any barbecue or picnic. Serve with rice, a green salad, fresh fruit — and lots of napkins!

Sauce
½ onion, diced (about ½ cup)
1½ T. minced garlic
½ cup minced ginger
1 cup honey
½ cup chopped fresh cilantro
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
2 T. paprika
¼ cup freshly squeezed lime juice
½ cup rice vinegar
½ cup peanut oil
1 T. salt
Steps: Put all of the above ingredients in a blender; purée for 2½ minutes. Set aside.

Ribs
2 racks of pork ribs (about 3½ lbs. each)
2 tsp. salt
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
Steps: Preheat oven to 500 degrees. Using a knife, separate the ribs into individual units. Place the ribs in a baking dish; sprinkle with the salt and pepper; bake for 20 minutes. Remove the ribs from the oven. Turn down the heat to 300 degrees. In a separate baking dish, spread a third of the sauce on the bottom; place the ribs on top of the sauce, and spoon the remaining sauce over the ribs. Cover the dish with aluminum foil and bake for 1½ hours. Serve immediately, accompanied by the leftover sauce.

morning assembly at 7 a.m. and, after a briefing, we suit up and clamber into the Zodiacs to be delivered to the first dive site.

Entering the water in the Andaman Sea is entering another state of reality. Warmness envelops the diver like a glove as he becomes part of an enchanted world that exists — unseen by most

air-breathers — right below the water's surface. Weightless, divers effortlessly glide through this multicolored world of corals, sea fans, stingrays, reef sharks and schools of fusiliers, tuna and batfish. Tiny nudibranchs, sea horses and crabs hide in the crevasses. A giant manta ray glides by like a huge angel; eels gape from their dens, silvery barracudas in hunting mode hang suspended in the water, while banded sea snakes search for prey in the coral. A large hawksbill turtle rises up from the sea bottom, swims away, then slowly arcs back, coming right up to stare curiously into my face mask, touching me before swimming off.

Night diving allows a different view of the ocean realm — the night hunters are out. I'm always a little wary of diving in the dark; it's disorienting; but equipped with a flashing strobe attached to my vest (just in case — so I can be located by search parties before being swept off to Borneo), I enter the dark realm. Our flashlight beams play over giant clams feeding, lion fish dancing — their feathery fins spread like fans — giant lobsters peering from their rocky dens, and parrotfish sleeping among the coral.

On one dive, a tropical squall blows up while we are below and the underwater world is magically illuminated by flashes of lightning on the surface. (The downside is returning to the junk on the rough sea, sitting in the open Zodiac — metal tanks strapped to our backs — as the heavy rain and lighting squall continues.)

Our days on the junk are spent alternating four dives with meals and siestas, followed by sunbathing and journal writing. We are fed well by the Thai cook; every meal coming from that small galley seems like a feast. In the evening, after desultory conversation and a game of dominoes, the tired divers, in their cabin bunks or camped on the deck under the night sky, are lulled to sleep by the engine's rattling hum as we

move to another dive location.
Note: The whale shark never keeps his appointment with us. We are told sightings have fallen off; it's thought to be because of the then recent incursion of Taiwanese shark fin hunters into the area.

Crispy garlic and pepper shrimp with sweet and spicy dipping sauce
(Serves 4)

Everybody likes shrimp, and this dish from Phuket is easy to prepare and the results are wonderful. It can be served as an appetizer or as a main dish. The preparation enhances the taste and texture of the shrimp, while the tangy dipping sauce makes the perfect flavor complement.

Garlic shrimp
1½ lbs. shrimp (31/40 size, about 50 shrimp) cleaned and deveined, tails left on
3 T. minced fresh garlic
½ cup flour
4 T. corn starch
1½ tsp. white pepper
1 T. salt
1½ cups peanut oil, for frying
Steps: Rinse the shrimp and place in a mixing bowl; add the minced garlic, toss well and set aside to rest 1 hour. Shift the flour, cornstarch, pepper and salt together into a medium-sized bowl. Toss the garlic-coated shrimp, 10 at a time, in the flour mixture, coating each one completely; shake off excess flour and place on a platter.

Heat the oil in a wok (or sauté pan) to 350 degrees. Add the shrimp (don't crowd — make in several batches); cook for 2 minutes. Immediately, using a slotted spoon, remove the crispy shrimp from the wok; place paper towels to drain. Transfer shrimp to a serving platter. Serve immediately accompanied by the sweet and spicy dipping sauce



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The ship's altar included offerings to ensure a safe voyage.

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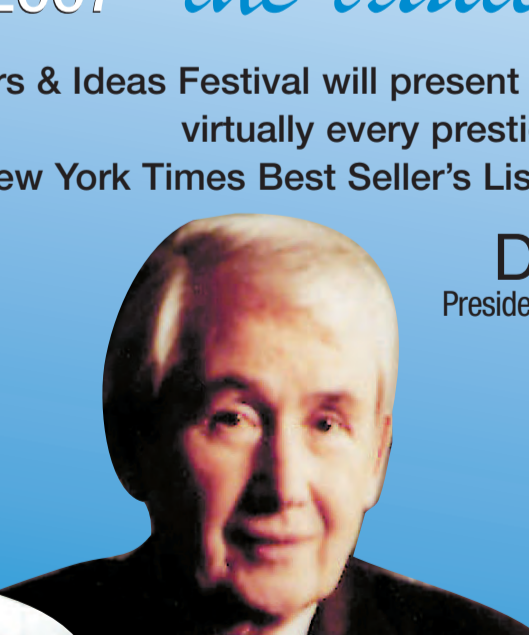
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