

Why I might never eat another fig

By DANIEL NEMAN
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Ew.
And also: Ick.
I like figs. I have always liked figs. I planned to continue liking figs for the rest of my fig-eating life.
But that was before I saw a video explaining some of the more disturbing facts about figs. The video was sent to me by someone who hates figs and knows I love figs and wanted to ruin my life by changing my mind about figs even though we have been happily married for 25 years.

The video was created by PBS, part of their digital series called "Gross Science." As far as I can tell, the entire purpose of the nearly five-minute video is to make people stop eating figs, as if someone at PBS is fiercely angry at the entire fig industry.

To be fair, I already knew some of what the piece had to say. I knew there was some relationship between wasps and figs, and that wasps who entered figs did not always leave them, if you catch my drift.

But I had chosen to forget it because, as I mentioned, I liked figs.

That was then.

Figs are unusual, because they are kind of

inside out. Inside each fig are anywhere from 30 to 1,600 tiny flowers, depending on the species. If you can picture the inside of a fig, that makes sense — all of those thin, long tube things are actually flowers. Each one contains a little seed, which is what crunches when you eat them.

Flowers, of course, have to be pollinated in order to make future figs. Bees, butterflies and even bats are pollinators, but how can anything pollinate these flowers when they are hidden away inside a fruit?

That is where the wasps come in, members of Agaonidae family. These very small insects are often called fig wasps, because "fig wasps" is easier to say than "Agaonidae."

When the flowers inside a fig are ready for pollination, they produce an aroma that attracts female fig wasps, but only the ones that are appropriate for that kind of tree (it is this kind of detail that leaves me in awe of science and nature).

The wasps enter the fig through a hole in the bottom that is too small to let in anything else that doesn't belong there. The hole is so small that the wasps usually lose their wings and antennae while

squeezing in, but that doesn't matter to the wasp because, as the U.S. Forest Service puts it, "it will never need them again."
The wasp drops fer-

the flowers and the eggs turn into grubs that grow inside some of the seeds. The grubs gain nourishment by eating the seed, and eventually emerge as

are technically their own sisters.

The male wasps then die inside the fig where they have spent their entire short lives.

the way birds and other animals always spread seeds.

But what about us? What about humans?

Humans have been domesticating fig trees for more than 11,000 years, and the type we usually eat, called common figs, do not require wasps. Some types of common fig are seedless and do not need any pollination at all.

Other common figs have male and female trees. Wasps can only pollinate the flowers in the figs from male trees, while we only eat the fruit of female trees.

But wasps can't tell the difference between male and female trees. If a wasp manages to get inside the fig of a female tree, it will pollinate the flowers inside it and then die. And yes, that fig could very well make it to your kitchen table.

Scientists marvel at the way fig trees and wasps, two completely different types of organism, rely on each other and use each other to propagate their species. The relationship is called mutualism, and yes, it is truly astonishing.

But still, if you ever eat a fig again, it might have a dead wasp inside it.

Ick.

And also: Ew.



Dreamstime/TNS

Figs are unusual, because they are kind of inside out.

tilized eggs into as many of the female flowers as it can. Meanwhile, it also pollinates all the flowers with the pollen it collected from the fig in which it was born. Having done what she was meant to do in the world, the wasp then dies inside the fig, happy but somewhat disconcertingly.

The seeds grow inside

wasps from the flowers into the fig.

The males emerge first. They have no wings, so they have to mate with females that are inside that fig. The females haven't even emerged yet, so the males mate with them while they are still inside the flowers — and yes, the males often mate with what

When the female wasps hatch, they collect pollen from the male flowers and work their way out of the figs. Filled with already fertilized eggs, they fly off to find another fig to begin the process again. Meanwhile, birds and other animals eat the figs, including their now-mature seeds, and go on to spread them



Ivy Ceballo/Tampa Bay Times-TNS

Cake designer and Wandering Whisk Bakeshop owner Jennifer Jacobs' recipe for Mini pina Colada Pavlovas is easy to replicate at home.

Pavlova recipe from a pastry pro

By HELEN FREUND
Tampa Bay Times

TAMPA, Fla. — Wandering Whisk Bakeshop owner Jennifer Jacobs is known for her decadent and colorful buttercream cakes, French macarons, cream puffs and cookie sandwiches. But did you know that the self-taught cake designer and pastry pro also makes a mean pavlova?

"Florida summers are hot, so I'm always looking for a light and refreshing dessert to serve when I'm entertaining," Jacobs said. Jacobs came up with this recipe while working at her bakery in Pinellas Park, Florida, where she regularly hosts pop-up events and works on custom orders. These miniature pineapple curd-filled pavlovas, a meringue-based dessert

with a crunchy exterior and soft and airy interior, are flavored with coconut and naturally gluten-free.

"Pavlovas look challenging but are actually quite simple to prepare," Jacobs said. "They will definitely make a statement on your table."

MINI PIÑA COLADA PAVLOVAS

Makes approximately one dozen.

For the pavlovas:

4 egg whites, at room temperature (save the egg yolks for curd)
¾ cup granulated sugar
2 teaspoons coconut extract
1 teaspoon cornstarch
1 teaspoon lemon juice

In a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat the egg whites on high until foamy,

about 1 minute. Gradually add the sugar, one spoonful at a time. Continue to beat until the meringue reaches stiff peaks, about 5 to 6 minutes.

Remove the bowl from the mixer. Using a rubber spatula, fold in coconut extract, cornstarch and lemon juice. Take care not to deflate the meringue.

Using an ice cream or cookie scoop, scoop out the meringue into 12 equal dollops onto a baking sheet. Use the back of a spoon to create a little nest in the middle. (This will hold the curd in place.)

Bake at 250 degrees for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Turn off the oven and leave the meringues in there for an additional 30 minutes. Remove from the oven and let cool.

For the pineapple curd:

4 egg yolks
¼ cup pineapple juice
½ cup granulated sugar
¼ teaspoon salt
5 tablespoons unsalted

butter, cold and cubed

For topping:
Toasted coconut, for garnish
Pineapple slices, for garnish

Combine egg yolks, pineapple juice and sugar in a saucepan. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly with a whisk until the mixture is thick enough to coat the back of a spoon and registers 160 degrees on a candy thermometer, about 4 to 6 minutes.

Remove from heat and add salt and butter, one piece at a time, stirring until smooth. Strain through a fine sieve into a bowl.

Cover the curd with plastic wrap, pressing it directly onto the surface of the curd. Refrigerate until chilled and set, at least 2 hours and up to 1 day.

To assemble the pavlovas, top each one with a hearty scoop of curd. Add toasted coconut and a slice of pineapple. Feel free to add fresh berries or any other fruit desired.

Sweet and simple tiramisu

By GRETCHEN MCKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

I tend to eat a lot of Popsicles for dessert during summer because they're sweet and cooling when the weather on my back porch is anything but. But I'm not against making something from scratch as long as it doesn't require turning on the oven.

This easy tiramisu fits the bill. Whether you use a hand mixer or a stand mixer (my preference), it whips together in a couple of minutes with just a handful of ingredients.

There are countless recipes for this classic, espresso-flavored dessert. Some call for beating the eggs and sugar over a pot of simmering water, or include heavy whipping cream in the ingredient list. I skip all that, adding mascarpone (a soft Italian cream cheese) directly to the egg and sugar mixture after it's been creamed in a mixer. It's easier and tastes just as good.

My son had just given me a bottle of dark rum so I used that to flavor the espresso, but you could also use Kahlua, brandy, Amaretto or Frangelica; traditional recipes include sweet marsala wine.

This recipe includes raw egg yolk, so if that won't do, look for pasteurized eggs.

EASY SUMMER TIRAMISU

6 egg yolks
1/4 cup sugar
Pinch of salt
16 ounces mascarpone cheese
2 cups freshly brewed strong espresso or coffee, cooled slightly
1/4 cup dark rum
Bittersweet cocoa powder, for garnish
Dark chocolate shavings or finely chopped dark chocolate, for garnish

Combine egg yolks, sugar and a pinch of salt in the bowl of a stand mixer. Beat on high speed until well mixed, and the egg mixture is light, creamy and very thick, around 4 minutes. Add mascarpone cheese and beat on medium speed just until smooth and well combined.

Pour espresso or coffee and rum into a shallow dish or bowl. Have an 8-by-8- or 8-by-10-inch baking dish at the ready.

Dip each ladyfinger into the coffee/rum mixture for a few seconds. You want the cookie to be soaked but not fall apart. Place soaked ladyfingers on the bottom of the baking dish. You may have to break some in half for them to fit the bottom.

Spread evenly half of the mascarpone mixture over the ladyfingers. Arrange another layer of soaked ladyfingers and top with remaining mascarpone mixture.

Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 2-8 hours to allow the flavors to mingle and the tiramisu to set up.

Before serving, use a fine-mesh sieve to dust the top with a heavy-handed layer of cocoa powder. Garnish with chocolate shavings or finely chopped chocolate.

Serves 4-6.

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