

Garden on Toast
Vern Nelson, The Hungry Gardener, 17 October 2009

Whether measured by its flavor, beauty or its appeal with a group, a bruschetta is hard to beat. A bruschetta is a slice of bread traditionally toasted over coals, rubbed with fresh garlic, then drizzled or brushed with olive oil, then salted and peppered, making them great hors d'oeuvres, a side dish or with the addition of tomatoes and basil, a light entree.

With a few adjustments however, a bruschetta is a perfect platform for dessert as well. Either way, bruschetta are an excellent vehicle for making your produce even more special. I have served these sweet or savory treats to all kinds of gatherings. They were a smash hit each time, especially when guests were allowed to build their own.

Bruschetta can be served year round using whatever home grown produce is available. With fall upon us, I'll be serving lots of bruschetta with crispy, caramel bottoms and topped with slices of tart apples, sweet pears, ground cherries or late raspberries and basil.

NEEDED - if broiling, a low setting will help to prevent burning the butter and sugar.

A high quality baguette is a must

Cream cheese, yogurt cheese or homemade mozzarella Butter, softened Brown sugar

Fresh basil leaves Toppings such as sliced apples, pears, figs and persimmons in fall or peaches, nectarines, apricots and berries in summer.

OPTIONAL - Grand Marnier or Triple Sec for blending into the cheese.

- fresh toasted, chopped nuts (my favorites are hazelnuts and walnuts).

- Honey, or a cider or Port reduction for drizzling or blending.

ASSEMBLING - Slice the baguette into thin disks (about 3/8 inch) thick.

Butter one side. Dredge the buttered side in brown sugar. Only a little sugar will stick. Arrange the disks buttered side down on a pre heated grill over a bed of coals or buttered side up under a broiler. They can scorch quickly so watch them very closely. It may take 30 seconds or less. Allow the sugar and butter to become golden and bubbly. Then remove from the heat. Allow the molten sugar to cool and harden like the top of creme brule. Transfer the disks to a serving plate and assemble with toppings or invite guests to build their own.

I once had 2 large trays of prepared bruschettas disappear in a little over a minute. There were only 10 guests. I did note at the time that every one of them had squirrel cheeks and a smile. Now there is an endorsement.

MY FAVORITES - Sliced, fresh pears drizzled with a Port reduction; sliced, fresh, tart apples tossed with a cider reduction; fresh, sliced nectarines topped with a fan cut strawberry. Put a bit of cream cheese on top and tuck in a basil leaf. For an over the top dessert, add some honey and fresh toasted, chopped nuts to the cheese before spreading it.

TIPS - Use only fresh, high quality bread such as Grand Central or Ken's Artisan

- Bruschetta are best served immediately, before the bread gets soggy.

- Bruschetta helps kitchen gardeners one more way to serve local crops in season.

- Be guided by color and creamy vs crispy and sweet vs sour flavors. These are good.