Golden-orange blushes with velvety skin...sounds like an excerpt from a steamy novel! It's no wonder apricots have long been considered aphrodisiacs.

Apricot trees flower and bear fruit early, hence the name apricot, derived from the Latin word for “precocious.” California apricots begin to appear in the supermarket as early as mid-May, the first stone fruit of the season. California’s San Joaquin Valley boasts prime-growing conditions and produces 95 percent of all apricots grown in the United States. Michigan’s prime apricot-growing region is located in the northwest part of the Lower Peninsula, and the growing season is short, only about two weeks beginning in mid- to late-July.

Apricots may look like small peaches, but they have an intensely sweet fragrance and a tangy taste that’s all their own. A whiff of citrus with herbal and floral notes tells you they are ripe. Fresh ready-to-eat apricots should be plump and fairly firm with a yellow-orange color. Avoid apricots with even a tinge of green as they will not ripen. Take apricots home only when you can eat them within a day or two, unless you are able to preserve them.

Because of their delicate nature, most apricots are not shipped fresh. Rather, they make a short trip to the grower’s processing facility to be dried, canned, frozen or made into preserves so you can enjoy apricots year-round. Treating dried apricots with sulfur dioxide keeps them moist and bright orange and prevents the development of mold. The Food and Drug Administration regulates the use of sulfites, which are generally considered safe although some people are sensitive to them. Specialty markets sell unsulfured dried apricots, known for their dark and shriveled appearance and great flavor, when used in cooking.

In Greece, apricots are called “golden eggs of the sun,” an apt description for these delightful nuggets. Chosen carefully at the peak of ripeness, fresh apricots can add juiciness to your steamy summer.

By Peggy Crum, RD, Health4U Nutritionist

Dried Apricots and Fig Sauce

Recipe developed by Corporate Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski and featured in Residential Dining Services. Serves 6 – 8

- ½ cup Apple Juice
- 1 cup Chicken Broth
- 1 Tablespoon Minced Fresh Ginger
- 1 teaspoon Cardamom
- ¾ cup Sliced Dried Apricots
- ¼ cup Diced Dried Figs
- 2 Tablespoons Golden Raisins
- 1 Tablespoon Unsalted Butter
- Salt and Pepper to taste

In a sauce pan over medium, heat apple juice, broth, ginger, cardamom and dried fruit. Simmer for 20 to 25 minutes until the volume is reduced by half. Remove from heat and whisk in the butter. Add salt and pepper to your taste preference.

Serve with grilled or roasted pork chops, pork loin, chicken or turkey.

Dried Apricots and Fig Sauce will be served for lunch at The Gallery at Snyder/Phillips and Riverwalk Market at Owen Hall on July 21. Visit www.eatatstate.com for dining hall hours and menus.

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