

sweettart

PUCKER UP FOR RHUBARB

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“Do you think the rain will hurt the rhubarb?” was the standard bit of small talk my friend’s mother always used when she wanted to fill a lull in the conversation—although she had no rhubarb in her garden. Nevertheless, she had all she could use, since rhubarb grows abundantly in her home state of Wisconsin. Vigorous as a weed, tough and tart when raw, crowned by extravagant, poisonous leaves, rhubarb grows profusely in the northern states.

Fond of cold winters and mild summers, rhubarb is a Siberian transplant, and despite its association with

sweets, it is really a vegetable. Commonly called “pie plant” a century ago, rhubarb wears this sobriquet well since it turns up most often in pies and strudels. Yet rhubarb is versatile, its mouth-puckering sourness adding zest not only to pies and strudels, but also to coffee cakes, fools and puddings. And those are just the desserts.

Russian and Latvian cooks combine chopped rhubarb and apples in a tangy salad. Italians sip *rabarbaro*, an aperitif—and the English have followed suit. One summer, I

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spotted rhubarb wine on the chalkboard at the Turf, a 16th-century pub in Oxford, England. Alas, they were fresh out.

Many flavors flatter rhubarb. While the routine pairing of rhubarb is with strawberries, apples, beets, ginger, cinnamon, raspberries and citrus (oranges especially), most other ingredients benefit from rhubarb's bright, tart taste.

Fresh, outdoor-grown rhubarb—with tender pink or red stalks that resemble celery—is available only in spring and early summer, and it is slowly finding its way into supermarkets. Hothouse rhubarb from the Pacific Northwest appears in February; the season for field-grown rhubarb begins in March or April, depending on the part of the country. Bright red field-grown and paler pink hothouse plants may share the same produce bin. Indeed they are interchangeable, but rhubarb grown outdoors will be deeper not only in color but also in taste.

At your market, choose thin, tender-crisp stalks. As rhubarb grows thicker, it becomes stringy and tough. Buy plenty during its relatively short season because it freezes well. To prepare rhubarb stalks, first trim off the leaves, which contain poisonous oxalic acid, and discard them. Use a paring knife to cut off the ends of the stalks and all brown or soft spots, and remove tough or rough parts. Then wash and dry thoroughly.

To freeze, chop rhubarb into ½-inch pieces, spread them on a cookie sheet and place them in the freezer. Once frozen, slide the pieces into a heavy-duty plastic bag. Seal tightly, and return to the freezer. Packed this way, rhubarb will keep for up to 4 months. A supply put away from now until the season ends should last through the fall, leaving the winter months for anticipation of this tart and pretty herald of spring.

Rhubarb Jam

MAKES 3 CUPS

If you do not want to process the jam in a boiling-water bath, simply store it in the refrigerator for up to 2 months.

2¼ lb. (about 8 cups) rhubarb, trimmed and sliced into 1-inch pieces
2½ cups granulated sugar
2 Tbs. grated orange zest
2 tsp. finely chopped crystallized ginger

Special equipment:

Sterile half-pint jars

1. Combine rhubarb, sugar and orange zest in mixing bowl. Cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for 12 hours.
2. Strain liquid from rhubarb mixture into a large heavy saucepan, pressing on solids to release all juice. Set rhubarb aside.
3. Bring liquid to a boil, and cook over medium heat until syrupy and reduced by half, for 15 to 20 minutes, watching closely toward end to prevent scorching. Add reserved rhubarb and crystallized ginger, and cook, stirring, until rhubarb is soft and mixture has thickened, for about 5 minutes.
4. Pour into hot, sterilized half-pint jars, leaving ¼-inch headspace. Tighten lids, and process in a boiling-water bath for 10 minutes. Remove from heat, cool and store.

PER SERVING: 45 CAL; 0G PROT; 0G TOTAL FAT (0G SAT. FAT); 11G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 0MG SOD; 0G FIBER; 11G SUGARS

Rhubarb Waffles with Rhubarb Sauce

SERVES 6

These tender waffles need time to set in the waffle iron before you lift the lid to check on them. Let patience rule, because peeking too soon will tear the waffle and make it difficult to remove. The sauce can be prepared ahead of time and stored, covered, in the refrigerator for up to 4 days. Bring to room temperature or heat before serving. If your waffle iron is not nonstick, brush it lightly with oil to prevent sticking.

Rhubarb Sauce

1¼ lb. (5 cups) rhubarb, trimmed and cut into ¼-inch-long pieces
1½ cups granulated sugar

Waffles

3 large eggs
1¼ cups nonfat milk
1½ Tbs. vegetable oil, preferably canola oil
1½ cups all-purpose flour
¼ cup whole wheat flour
3 Tbs. granulated sugar
1 Tbs. baking powder
¼ tsp. salt

1. To make Rhubarb Sauce: Combine rhubarb and sugar in a saucepan, and cook over medium-low heat until rhubarb is tender and translucent, about 15 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer about 1 cup of rhubarb to a small bowl, and reserve for waffle batter. Increase heat to medium, and cook remaining rhubarb in syrup, stirring occasionally, until slightly thickened, for about 5 minutes.

2. To make Waffles: Whisk eggs in a mixing bowl until frothy. Whisk in milk and oil. Stir in reserved 1 cup cooked rhubarb. Sift flours, sugar, baking powder and salt into a mixing bowl. Gently stir dry ingredients into egg-milk mixture just until moistened.

3. Preheat a waffle iron to medium-high. Fill the iron about two-thirds full. Close, and cook waffles until they are nicely browned, for about 4 minutes. Repeat with remaining batter, coating waffle iron lightly with oil, if necessary, before cooking each batch. Serve waffles hot, topped with Rhubarb Sauce.

PER SERVING: 450 CAL; 10G PROT; 7G TOTAL FAT (1G SAT. FAT); 91G CARB; 105MG CHOL; 400MG SOD; 3G FIBER; 60G SUGARS

Cool and Tangy Rhubarb-Beet Borscht

SERVES 4

The brilliant magenta of this soup will make you swoon. Serve as an appetite-awakening first course or for a lovely light lunch, accompanied by an assortment of rye crackers and a crisp green salad. Look



COOL and TANGY RHUBARB-BEET BORSCHT

for *lebni*, or kefir cheese, at a Middle Eastern market.

1¼ lb. beets, stems trimmed and well scrubbed
8 oz. (about 2 cups) fresh rhubarb, trimmed, cleaned and diced
1 small English cucumber, cut into chunks
½ cup *lebni* or full-fat plain yogurt plus additional for topping soup

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Slivered red onion for garnish

1. Put beets in a large saucepan, and cover with water. Put a lid on pan, and cook beets over medium heat until completely tender, for about 18 minutes. Drain beets, reserving cooking water.

2. Put rhubarb into a saucepan, and add ½ cup cooking water from beets. Cover,

bring to a boil over medium heat and cook for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally, until rhubarb is very tender. Remove from heat, and set aside to cool.

3. When beets are cool enough to handle, slip off skins, and cut beets into chunks. Put beets, cucumber, rhubarb, *lebni* and ¾ cup cooking water from beets into food processor, and purée until very smooth.

4. Transfer soup to a large bowl, and add more beet cooking liquid if desired to thin





soup. Season with salt and pepper. Ladle into bowls, and top with spoonfuls of *lebni* and a sprinkling of red onion, if desired.

PER SERVING: 150 CAL; 4G PROT; 8G TOTAL FAT (4.5G SAT. FAT); 17G CARB; 25MG CHOL; 135MG SOD; 4G FIBER; 12G SUGARS

Wine Suggestions

Pairing wines with tart rhubarb is hard, but this tangy soup calls for a lush white wine such as the Domaines Schlumberger Riesling from the Alsatian region in France.

Crunchy Rhubarb-Apple Salad

SERVES 6 30 MINUTES OR LESS

Cooks familiar with Russian cooking will recognize the sharp combination of chopped raw rhubarb and apples. This makes an excellent accompaniment to a lunch of cheeses, fruit and crusty bread.

½ to ¾ lb. thin, tender rhubarb, trimmed and cleaned

- 2 Granny Smith apples**
- 2 stalks celery, diced**
- 4 scallions, trimmed and sliced**
- ½ cup sour cream**
- ¼ cup crumbled blue cheese**
- ¼ cup chopped, toasted walnuts**

1. Cut rhubarb into ¼-inch-long pieces. Peel, core and dice apples. Combine rhubarb, apples, celery, and scallions in mixing bowl, stirring to mix.

2. Stir in sour cream and blue cheese until ingredients are evenly coated. Sprinkle with walnuts, and serve.

PER SERVING: 90 CAL; 2G PROT; 6G TOTAL FAT (3.5G SAT. FAT); 9G CARB; 15MG CHOL; 100MG SOD; 2G FIBER; 5G SUGARS

Crackled-Topped Rhubarb Coffee Cake

SERVES 8

Chunks of rhubarb accent this moist, tender cake. Sprinkle cinnamon and sugar

over the batter before baking to create a crisp top.

Cake

- 2 cups all-purpose flour**
- 1 cup granulated sugar**
- 4 tsp. baking powder**
- 1 tsp. ground cinnamon**
- ½ tsp. salt**
- 1 large egg**
- 1 cup buttermilk**
- ¼ cup vegetable oil, preferably canola oil**
- 2 tsp. pure vanilla extract**
- ½ lb. (2 cups) rhubarb, trimmed and cut into ½-inch pieces**

Topping

- ¼ cup granulated sugar**
- ½ tsp. ground cinnamon**

1. To make Cake: Preheat oven to 350F. Oil lightly an 8-inch square baking pan or spray with nonstick cooking spray. Set aside.

CRUNCHY RHUBARB-APPLE SALAD



RHUBARB-STRAWBERRY SUMMER PUDDING



2. Sift flour, sugar, baking powder, cinnamon and salt into mixing bowl. Whisk together egg, buttermilk, oil and vanilla in a separate bowl. Add flour mixture to egg mixture, and stir with a rubber spatula or wooden spoon just to blend. Stir in rhubarb. Turn batter into prepared pan, spreading evenly.

3. To make Topping: Stir together sugar and cinnamon. Sprinkle evenly over top of cake.

4. Bake for 45 to 50 minutes, or until top is brown and crackled and a toothpick inserted in center comes out clean. Remove from oven, and cool in pan on a wire rack for 15 minutes. Cut into squares, and serve while still warm.

PER SERVING: 330 CAL; 5G PROT; 8G TOTAL FAT (1G SAT. FAT); 59G CARB; 30MG CHOL; 430MG SOD; 1G FIBER; 34G SUGARS

Rhubarb-Strawberry Summer Pudding

SERVES 6

Warm-weather puddings make excellent desserts because they do not require baking. This particular dessert is ideal after a barbecue meal.

¾ lb. (3 cups) rhubarb, trimmed and cut into ¼-inch pieces
3 cups strawberries, hulled and quartered
1 cup granulated sugar
½ tsp. grated lemon zest
21 slices thin-sliced white bread, crusts trimmed
Soft whipped cream, optional
Red currants, strawberries or mint leaves for garnish

1. Stir together rhubarb, strawberries, sugar and lemon zest in a saucepan. Heat over medium heat until simmering. Cover, and reduce heat to low, cooking for 3 minutes. Remove from heat, and set aside.

2. Cut a circle of bread same diameter as bottom of ramekin for each of six ¾-cup-capacity ramekins or custard cups. Place a bread circle in bottom of each ramekin.

3. Cut 9 slices of bread in half lengthwise, and fit strips horizontally around inside of each ramekin, using 2½ or 3 strips for each and trimming to fit.

4. Spoon about ⅓ cup of rhubarb mixture into each ramekin, filling to top. Cut circles

from remaining bread slices to fit tops of ramekins, placing circles on fruit. Wrap each pudding in plastic, and set 3 ramekins on plate. Stack remainder on top, setting small, round, heavy object on top of each stack to weigh it down. Refrigerate puddings overnight.

5. To serve, remove weights, and unwrap ramekins. Run a small knife around inside edge of each one, and invert onto dessert plates. Serve with soft whipped cream, if desired, and garnish with red currants, strawberries or mint.

PER SERVING: 290 CAL; 5G PROT; 2G TOTAL FAT (0G SAT. FAT); 66G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 340MG SOD; 3G FIBER; 39G SUGARS

Rhubarb Fool

SERVES 8

Choose the reddest rhubarb stalks you can find for this fool. Be sure to chill a mixing bowl before whipping the cream in it.

1 cinnamon stick
3 whole cloves
1 2-inch-long strip lemon zest



2¼ lb. (8 cups) rhubarb, trimmed and cut into ½-inch-long pieces
¼ cups granulated sugar
2 cups nonfat vanilla yogurt
½ cup whipping cream

1. Tie cinnamon stick, cloves and lemon zest together in a cheesecloth bag. Combine rhubarb, sugar and spice bag in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Cook, stirring occasionally, until mixture has consistency of applesauce, for 6 to 8 minutes. Discard spice bag. Chill rhubarb mixture for about 1 hour.

2. Meanwhile, line a colander with cheesecloth, and set it over a bowl. Spoon in yogurt, and let it drain in refrigerator until yogurt measures 1½ cups, for 45 minutes to 1 hour.

3. Put drained yogurt in a bowl. Add rhubarb mixture, and fold lightly, leaving some swirls. Whip cream in a chilled bowl, and swirl it into fool. Spoon into individual dishes. Cover, and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 6 hours.

PER SERVING: 250 CAL; 4G PROT; 6G TOTAL FAT (3.5G SAT. FAT); 47G CARB; 20MG CHOL; 50MG SOD; 2G FIBER; 43G SUGARS

Bob Swanson's Rhubarb Custard Pie

SERVES 8

Bob Swanson, from my hometown of Appleton, Wisconsin, baked wonderful pies. I have adjusted his original recipe to reduce the fat content.

Crust

1 cup all-purpose white flour
1 Tbs. sugar
½ tsp. salt
1 Tbs. butter
3 Tbs. vegetable oil, preferably canola oil

Filling

¼ cup sugar
1 Tbs. butter, softened
1 large egg
2 large egg whites
¼ cup skim milk
1 tsp. pure vanilla extract

1½ lb. (5 cups) rhubarb, trimmed and cut into ¼-inch pieces
2 Tbs. all-purpose white flour

Meringue

3 large egg whites
¼ tsp. cream of tartar
½ cup granulated sugar

1. To make Crust: Set oven rack at lowest level, and preheat to 375F. Lightly oil a 9-inch glass pie plate, or coat it with nonstick cooking spray. Set aside.

2. Stir together flour, sugar and salt in a mixing bowl. Melt butter in a saucepan over low heat, swirling it in the pan for about 30 seconds, until light brown. Pour into a small bowl, and set aside to cool. Stir in oil.

3. Using a fork, slowly stir butter-oil mixture into flour until mixture is crumbly. Gradually stir in enough ice water, about 1 to 2 tablespoons, so that dough holds together. Press dough into a flattened disk.

4. Place 2 sheets of plastic wrap overlapping by 2 inches on work surface. Place pastry in center, and cover with 2 more overlapping sheets of plastic wrap. With a rolling pin, roll dough into a circle about 12 inches round. Remove the top sheets, and invert the dough over the prepared pie plate. Carefully peel away remaining plastic wrap. Fold edges under at rim, and crimp. Chill pastry while you prepare filling.

5. To make Filling: Beat together sugar and butter in a mixing bowl until well mixed. Beat in egg, egg whites, milk and vanilla until well blended. In another bowl, toss rhubarb with flour. Stir rhubarb into egg mixture. Turn filling into crust-lined pan, spreading evenly.

6. Bake for about 1¼ hours, or until filling is firm. Remove from oven, and let cool to room temperature before adding meringue.

7. To make Meringue: Position rack in center of oven, and preheat to 375F.

8. Beat egg whites with an electric mixer on medium speed until frothy. Add cream of tartar, and beat on high speed just until soft peaks form. While beating egg whites, gradually add sugar. Beat mixture until whites are stiff and glossy. Spread meringue

over pie filling, making sure that it touches edge of crust all around.

9. Bake for 12 to 15 minutes, or until top is lightly browned. Let cool on a rack for 1 hour before serving.

PER SERVING: 300 CAL; 6G PROT; 9G TOTAL FAT (2G SAT. FAT); 50G CARB; 35MG CHOL; 105MG SOD; 2G FIBER; 34G SUGARS

Rhubarb-Peach Shortcake

SERVES 8

Juicy rhubarb and fragrant peaches soak deliciously into tender buttermilk biscuits, making this an ideal summertime treat.

Biscuits

1 cup all-purpose flour
1 cup cake flour
1 Tbs. baking powder
½ tsp. baking soda
½ tsp. salt
2½ Tbs. cold unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
2½ Tbs. cold cream cheese, cut into small pieces
¾ cup buttermilk
1 large egg white, lightly beaten
1 tsp. granulated sugar

Filling

¾ lb. (3 cups) rhubarb, trimmed and cut into ½-inch-long pieces
½ cup granulated sugar
1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice
2 ripe peaches
¼ cup whipping cream
1 cup nonfat vanilla yogurt

1. To make Biscuits: Preheat oven to 425F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper, or coat sheet with nonstick cooking spray.

2. Stir together all-purpose flour, cake flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt in a mixing bowl. Use a pastry blender or 2 table knives to cut butter and cream cheese into dry ingredients until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Make a well in center, and add buttermilk. Stir with a fork just until a dough forms.

3. Turn dough out onto a lightly floured surface, and knead it very briefly. Pat into a ¼-inch-thick piece, and cut biscuits with a

3-inch cutter. Reroll any dough scraps, and cut. Arrange biscuits on prepared baking sheet, brush tops with egg white and sprinkle with sugar.

4. Bake for about 10 minutes, or until golden brown. Remove from oven, transfer to a rack and let cool slightly.

5. To make Filling: Stir together in a medium-sized saucepan rhubarb, sugar and lemon juice. Bring to a simmer over low heat. Cook, uncovered, for 1 minute. With

a slotted spoon, transfer rhubarb to a bowl. Increase heat to medium, and boil liquid until syrupy, about 2 minutes or until about ½ cup remains. Add syrup to reserved rhubarb, and set aside.

6. Blanch peaches in boiling water for 1 minute. Remove peaches with a slotted spoon, and refresh under cold water. Slip off skins and discard. Cut peaches in half, remove pits and thinly slice. Add to rhubarb, and stir gently to mix. Whip

cream in a chilled bowl until firm peaks form. Fold into yogurt.

7. To assemble shortcakes, use a serrated knife to slice biscuits in half, and place bottoms on dessert plates. Spoon fruit filling onto and around biscuits. Spoon some yogurt-cream topping over fruit. Replace biscuit tops, and top with whipped cream.

PER SERVING: 290 CAL; 7G PROT; 9G TOTAL FAT (5G SAT. FAT); 47G CARB; 25MG CHOL; 480MG SOD; 1G FIBER; 20G SUGARS



RHUBARB-PEACH SHORTCAKE