Figs are an ancient food and have been cultivated all around the Mediterranean since Antiquity. A few miles from Toulon, near the sun-drenched beaches of Hyères and Le Lavandou, lies the little town of Solliès-Point, which has the unlikely distinction of being the French fig capital. Figs have been grown in the river basin around the town since the middle ages and the inhabitants are fiercely proud of their local variety of big, purple fig - “La Violette de Solliès”.

Late August, when the summer heat is at its height, is the time for the fig harvest and also time for the annual Fête de la Figue - the fig festival. Fresh figs are for sale by the crate, piled up high under awnings, stacked in the backs of vans and on handcarts. But the fresh fruit is only one of the incredible variety of fig products for sale here, as the whole town is taken over by stalls selling jams, cakes, breads, syrups, chutneys and all manner of culinary delights. Little fig trees can also be bought so that one can enjoy growing figs at home. Last year I bought a bottle of “Figoun”, a local, fig-based liqueur, intending to keep it for Christmas. I don’t think it even saw the end of September.

Figs are an excellent source of fibre, both soluble and insoluble, and are well known for their gentle laxative effect, easing constipation and helping to cleanse the colon. They have traditionally been used as a vermifuge (a remedy that expels intestinal worms) and contain the enzyme ficin, which is chemically similar to papain (from papaya) and bromelain (from pineapple). Figs have also been used as an anti-spasmodic and may help ease bowel cramps and gut motility problems.

The fruit is unusually high in calcium and contains good amounts of potassium, manganese, vitamin B6 and vitamin K. Where it really scored, though is in its content of polyphenol antioxidants which, weight for weight, are higher in dried figs than in fresh ones. The amount of beneficial anthocyanins is also greater in the dark-skinned fig varieties (such as the “Violette de Solliès”) than in the pale ones.

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Fresh figs are only around for a short season, so make the most of them while you can. Dried figs, on the other hand, are available all year round and retain many of the health benefits of the fresh fruit. Be adventurous with figs; they work well in both sweet and savoury dishes, adding a smooth texture and a delicious taste.

Bon appétit et bonne santé!