



Cheese and cherries can be a delicious pair.

It's Cherry Season!

BONNIE SWANK

May is cherry season in California, but many of you may remember that cherries were scarce throughout the state last year.

The warm winter didn't provide the trees with the chill hours they needed, and the drought didn't provide them with enough water. On top of all that, unbeknownst to us, our orchard had become home to some very hungry and damaging worms. When the trees started to leaf out they looked like lace—the trees were sick and for the first time in the history of our orchard we had no fruit.

Cherries are a delicate crop and growing them is a gamble for farmers who choose to plant them. Not only do cherries need the cold winter months and rain, they

also need the bees to do their job in the pollination department. Then we wait.

As optimistic as it may look when the cherries start to grow, only those that are actually pollinated will continue to mature, the others will shrivel up and drop to the ground. The only thing that could hurt the crop at this point would be hail, scaring the green fruit. Once the fruit starts to color, birds come in and they are not polite, flying through the orchard pecking at the best fruit and moving on. They couldn't just take one cherry and be happy. No, they have to ruin as much fruit as they can.

Many stone fruits suffer the same problems, but cherries have the thinnest skin of all, making them more susceptible to problems. Where other fruit can

withstand a heavy rain right before harvest, it's disastrous for cherries because it causes the fruit to burst and crack.

So what does this year look like for California's cherry crop? Right now, positive.

The Murrays, our friends in Arvin, right near Bakersfield, started picking cherries in the middle of April. Due to the rains, they've lost about 25 percent of their first crop of Brooks' cherries. Bakersfield is much warmer than the central coast, so they're the first in the state to pick cherries. The Murrays, like us, grow several varieties of cherries, which stretches the seasons from front to back. As I write this article there is rain in the forecast, so they have their fingers crossed. Our cherries are still sorting themselves out so there is no reason to worry yet. Unlike our friends, Hollister is the last to pick cherries in California.

NOTE: For the best tasting cherries buy bright, firm fruit with green stems. Fruit that is old or has been stored in cold storage will be soft and tasteless.

Sweet Cherries with Robiola Cheese

Recipe Courtesy of Marthastuart.com

The delicate texture of Robiola, a mild and creamy Italian cheese, is a great partner for sweet cherries. Ricotta or soft goat cheese would also work nicely.

Prep: 5 mins

Total time: 5 mins

Servings: 4

INGREDIENTS

- Robiola cheese, room temperature
- 8 ounces fresh sweet cherries (1 ½ cups)
- 3 tablespoons sliced almonds, toasted
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme
- Extra-virgin olive oil, for drizzling
- 1 baguette, ripped into pieces

DIRECTIONS

Place cheese on a serving platter. Top with cherries, almonds, and thyme. Drizzle with oil. Serve with baguette.