

taste of tradition:

blackberries & buzzard lopes

Sweet berries and even sweeter memories



BY VIRGINIA WILLIS
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BLACKBERRIES ARE A COMPLICATED SUMMER FRUIT. The simplicity of peaches or the candylike lovability of blueberries is friendlier. Peaches flood the mouth with a honeyed sweetness that's fragrant with vanilla. Blueberries are a Disney version of a berry, round and gentle like a bouncing sing-along ball. Blackberries? These midnight purple berries are thick in the mouth like wine, musky, and sharp with sweet and sour edges—not much simplicity here.

Wild blackberries grow prolifically throughout the South, in the ditches along dusty red-dirt roads, and they are the thick undergrowth of piney woods. Huge brambles protect the berries. Growing up, my sister and I would go blackberry picking with my grandfather. My grandmother Meme insisted we wear long sleeves and full-length pants, regardless of the sweltering heat, to protect our tender skin from the sharp, thorny vines. We complained mightily, but it was wasted breath. The three of us would grab a few plastic buckets fitted with wire handles and walk down toward the pond, where the blackberries grew at the forest's edge.

My grandfather was named Samuel Hugh Baston. He went by Sam, but we called him Dede. Tall and handsome with broad shoulders and thick massive trunks for arms, he looked like he meant business. He must have swept my grandmother off her feet in their youth, with his dark hair and sapphire blue eyes, even though she was a college-educated Southern lady and he a country boy with limited education. His larger-than-life physical presence commanded and demanded respect. In truth, he was a gentle giant and had experienced only one fight in his entire life. He cried at the sound of an organ playing.

When picking blackberries, my sister and I each grabbed one of Dede's gnarled hands, and we'd skip sort of sideways down the hill, slapping our thighs. We called it the "buzzard lope" for reasons never understood. (Recent research suggests the buzzard lope was a dance that likely originated with slaves and was meant to mimic a turkey vulture or buzzard flapping its wings and loping about to eat a deceased mule or cow.)

Once we neared the bushes, Dede tromped through the grass to make sure the area was free of snakes. He taught us to look for firm, ripe blackberries with a plump feel. He showed us that the ripe berries pull free easily, with only a slight tug. He told us to leave the red, pale purple, and blond berries on the vine. He was kind, but not patient with waste; he grew up harvesting from the land and growing much of his family's food.



PHOTO BY BRIAN WOODCOCK

My sister and I ate at least one berry for every berry that went into our buckets. We'd return to Meme, an hour or so later, with stained smiles, blackened teeth, and sweaty red faces. Meme would make cobbler in her cast-iron skillet. She also boiled the blackberries and then hung the fruit in an old muslin pillowcase on the porch to separate the juice to make jelly. Nothing was wasted.

Harvesting from the land is free, whereas farm-raised blackberries can be expensive. Farm-raised berries are generally much larger than wild ones, but they can be used in recipes if you're not able to find yourself a briar patch. I'll be honest, though. Expensive store-bought blackberries don't compare with the juicy jewels we harvested with Dede. Those berries tasted sweeter because of the love that went into picking them and the memories made from them. I love peaches, and blueberries have their place. But I am pretty sure nothing tastes better than a bucket of blackberries after a serious buzzard lope. 🍷

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mama's sweet biscuits with stewed blackberries

Recipe development by Virginia Willis
Yield: 4 to 6 servings

2 cups Southern all-purpose flour, such as White Lily, or 2 cups cake flour (not self-rising), plus more for rolling out
3 tablespoons sugar, divided
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 teaspoon fine sea salt
4 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut into bits and chilled
1 cup whole milk, plus more for brushing tops of biscuits
1 recipe Stewed Blackberries (recipe follows)
Garnish: unsweetened whipped cream

1. Preheat oven to 500°. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper or a nonstick silicone baking sheet. Set aside.

2. In a large bowl, combine flour, 1 tablespoon sugar, baking powder, and salt. Using a pastry blender or two knives, cut butter into flour mixture until it resembles coarse meal. Pour in milk, and gently mix until just combined.
3. Turn dough out onto a lightly floured surface. Knead lightly, using the heel of your hand to compress and push dough away from you, then fold it back over itself. Give dough a small turn and repeat about 8 times. (It's not yeast bread; you want to just barely activate the gluten, not overwork it.) Using a lightly floured rolling pin, roll dough to 1/4-inch thickness in roughly a 12x12-inch square.
4. Using a pastry wheel, cut dough into strips approximately 4x2 inches. Liberally brush dough with milk, and sprinkle with remaining 2 tablespoons sugar. Using an offset spatula, transfer the strips of dough to prepared baking sheet.

5. Bake until deep golden brown, approximately 10 minutes. Remove to a rack to cool.
6. To serve, divide sweet biscuits among 6 serving bowls, and top with stewed blackberries. Garnish with unsweetened whipped cream. Serve immediately.

stewed blackberries

Recipe development by Virginia Willis
Yield: approximately 2 cups

12 ounces fresh blackberries, or frozen, defrosted
3/4 cup cold water, divided
1/3 cup sugar
1/8 teaspoon fine sea salt
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 tablespoon unsalted butter, chilled

1. Place blackberries in a medium saucepan with 1/2 cup water, sugar, and salt. Bring to a boil over high heat, and cook, stirring with a whisk or old-fashioned potato masher to crush the berries, until the berries are pulpy, 3 to 5 minutes.
2. In a liquid measuring cup, combine remaining 1/4 cup water and flour. Stir well with a fork or small whisk until well combined and no lumps remain. Add flour mixture to berries, and return to a boil. Cook until slightly thickened, another 3 to 5 minutes. Add vanilla, and remove from heat. Add butter, stirring to combine.



blackberry salad

Recipe development by Virginia Hornbuckle
Yield: 6 servings

1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1 cup pecan halves
2 teaspoons kosher salt
9 cups arugula
1 1/2 cups fresh blackberries
1 (4-ounce) package goat cheese, crumbled
3 grilled chicken breasts, sliced
Blackberry Vinaigrette (recipe follows)

1. Heat oil in a medium skillet over medium heat. Add pecans, stirring to coat with oil. Cook for 4 to 6 minutes, stirring often, or until pecans are toasted and fragrant. Sprinkle with kosher salt. Set aside to cool.
2. Divide arugula among 6 serving plates. Top with blackberries, prepared pecans, and goat cheese, tossing gently. Top with chicken breast slices.
3. Drizzle with desired amount of Blackberry Vinaigrette.



blackberry vinaigrette

Recipe development by Virginia Hornbuckle
Yield: 1 1/2 cups

2 cups fresh blackberries
3 tablespoons sugar
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
1/4 cup olive oil
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper

1. In the container of a blender, combine blackberries and sugar. Pulse until liquefied. Add balsamic vinegar, pulsing until combined. With blender running, slowly add olive oil. Add salt and pepper, pulsing to combine. Store any leftovers in refrigerator.



blackberry-almond upside down cake

Recipe development by Virginia Hornbuckle
Yield: 1 (9-inch) cake

- 1/2 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1 cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar
- 3 large eggs
- 1/2 teaspoon almond extract
- 1 1/2 cups cake flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons whole buttermilk
- 1 1/3 cups sliced almonds, divided
- 1/2 cup unsalted butter, melted and divided
- 1 1/4 cups firmly packed brown sugar or turbinado sugar, divided
- 3 to 4 cups fresh blackberries

1. Preheat oven to 350°. Spray 1 (9-inch) round cake pan with nonstick cooking spray. Set aside.
2. In a large bowl, beat butter at medium speed with an electric mixer until creamy. Gradually add sugar, beating until fluffy. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add almond extract, beating to combine.
3. In a medium bowl, combine flour, baking powder, and salt. Sift twice.
4. Add flour mixture alternately with buttermilk to butter mixture, beginning and ending with flour mixture. Fold in 2/3 cup almonds.
5. Pour 1/4 cup melted butter into bottom of prepared pan. Sprinkle evenly with 3/4 cup brown sugar. Arrange blackberries in a single layer over brown sugar. Pour batter over blackberries.
6. Bake until a wooden pick inserted in center comes out clean, 40 to 45 minutes. Let cake cool for 10 minutes in pan. Remove from pan, and let cake cool completely.
7. In a medium bowl, combine remaining 1/4 cup melted butter, remaining 2/3 cup sliced almonds, and remaining 1/2 cup brown sugar, tossing gently to blend. Sprinkle over top of prepared cake.



You'll find the recipe for this delicious Blackberry Tart at tasteofthesouthmagazine.com/webextras.

