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Seduction by fig

Now that so many Americans are discovering its pleasures, farmers are sending more fresh fruit to market and developing delicious -- and gorgeous -- new varieties.

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It is almost impossible to describe a fresh fig without veering into pornography. The skin is nearly human in its tenderness. And the pulp within is as luscious as some exotic cross between fruit jam and honey. You don't so much bite into a fig as engage it in a long, sweet kiss.

They're so beautiful and so fragile-seeming that you'd think they must be available only at the most exclusive markets and at the highest prices. But fresh figs are now showing up in mainstream stores, costing not that much more than an out-of-season apple.

It's ironic that so many people know the fig only as the first name of a cookie named Newton — that this most sensuous of fruits is familiar only after it has been dried, ground to a paste and used to stuff a healthful high-fiber snack. It's like knowing Angelina Jolie only for her charity work.

Ironic, certainly, but also perfectly understandable. Fig Newtons are still the final resting place for many of the figs that are grown in California. (Nabisco, which makes the cookie, is the biggest buyer of fig paste in the world.)

But an increasing percentage of the state's fig crop is being picked fresh. The fresh fig harvest, which had been inching up during the last decade or so, nearly doubled between 2003 and 2005. One major shipper says his fresh business increased more than 40% in the last year, and that it's nearly triple what it was in 2000.

Though it is true that farmers markets kept the fervor for fresh figs alive when they were otherwise almost impossible to find, the volume and variety of figs offered at them doesn't seem to have increased. Instead, it's places such as Trader Joe's, Whole Foods and Costco, where you can find stacks of figs packed in clear plastic clamshell boxes, that are fueling the new interest.

A mystery to many

FRESH still accounts for just less than 10% of the total fig harvest, but from all accounts its growth should continue. The two largest growers of figs, who farm more than half of the acreage in the state, both say their goal is to get fresh figs up to between 25% and 33% of their total harvests.

Before they can do that, though, there are some hurdles to overcome. Most notable among them? Most folks know almost nothing about fresh figs.

Though they are one of the oldest domesticated fruits in the world, mentioned repeatedly in the Bible, figs are a brand new food to most Americans. A recent survey found that only 9% of consumers had knowingly eaten a fig — dried or fresh — in the last year (apparently, that first-name cookie connection wasn't a joke). The only other fruit that ranked as low was the guava.

That leaves fig growers with a decidedly bad news-good news marketing situation.

"There are two sides to the story," says Richard Matoian, manager of the California Fig Advisory Board and the guy in charge of promoting figs, fresh and dried. "Of course, you can say, 'Boy, isn't it terrible that there is such a low percentage of people who have tried figs recently?'"

"But the opposite side is that now we have an opportunity to introduce a new fruit to a lot of people who don't have a lot of baggage with it. There aren't very many people who say, 'I just don't like figs.'"

The fig is a most peculiar fruit. In fact, botanically it's not a fruit. It's a flower — or, more accurately, a cluster of flowers — turned inside out. The peel is the fleshy base; the pulp on the inside is the collective pistils and stamens of many individual blooms. The actual fruit is what we think of as the fig's seeds — tiny dried fruits called achenes (just like those on the outside of a strawberry), which each contain an even tinier real seed.

This arrangement, with all the important parts hidden away, creates significant disadvantages when it comes to reproduction. Figs have evolved to get around this in a couple of ways. First, some common fig varieties such as Brown Turkey and Black Mission are self-pollinating — all of the action takes place inside the flower without any help from insects. (And some new varieties don't require pollination — you can tell these because you won't feel any seeds popping when you bite into them.)

Other fig varieties, including some that have been most important historically, require more particular arrangements. These figs can be pollinated only with the help of a tiny gnat-size wasp, which crawls into the hole at the base of the fig to spread the pollen.

This presented a seemingly insurmountable problem in the early days of the fig industry, before the turn of the century. The Calimyrna, then regarded as the queen of figs in the rest of the world, simply could not be made to bear fruit in California until this relationship was discovered and the fig wasp could be imported along with the trees. Even today, in springtime all over the Central Valley, you'll see 'Calimyrna' orchards decorated with hanging brown paper bags that contain colonies of these wasps.

Furthermore, unlike other tree fruits, which bear only one crop every year, most figs produce fruit twice. The first crop, called breba, appears in the spring and early summer on the previous year's growth and is smaller in number, although the fruit is large in size and sometimes — though not always — a little sweeter. The second, main crop appears in late summer and early fall, right about now.

The fresh and dried fig businesses are inextricably intertwined. Not only are they grown by the same people, but until now they've almost always been grown on the same trees.

Dried figs are harvested in much the same way as they have been for centuries. The fruit ripens and dries on the tree until it is too heavy for the stem to support it. After it falls or is shaken to the ground, it is raked to the center of the row and left to sun dry a little longer. Then all of the dried figs are swept together to finish the process.

Fresh figs are taken from the same trees, but they are picked before the fruit has begun to dry. "What we usually do is pick around the circumference of the trees until the fruit starts falling to the ground on its own and we're stepping on them," says Kevin Herman, co-owner with his

wife of the Specialty Crop Co., one of the largest growers of figs in the state. "That's when we send everything else to dried."

That sounds simple, but in practice it is a lot more complicated. Because ripe fresh figs are so fragile, they must be clipped from the tree one at a time rather than being plucked from the branch as most fruits are. And to keep them from being squashed by their own weight, they are collected in 1-gallon containers rather than in big buckets.

Finally, rather than being shipped to a main packing shed to be sorted into boxes, the figs are packed right in the field, on wooden tables under tents. They go straight from the field to the refrigerated warehouse and then to the store. Each tree needs to be picked at least every other day during the harvest period, which can last several months.

Growers bet on fresh

RECENTLY, Herman and Richard DeBenedetto, the other major grower of figs in the state (between them they farm about 7,000 of California's 12,000 total acres), have put in orchards that will be dedicated to the fresh market. These high-density plantings allow for as many as three times more trees per acre, but the close spacing will make it nearly impossible to harvest the figs for drying.

"All of these figs will need to be marketed as fresh or we'll lose our shirts," Herman says. "But I'm confident the market will continue to expand."

Why go to all that bother and take the risk? There's both a carrot and a stick involved in the changes in the fig business. The stick is the threat that what happened in the 1990s could happen again. That's when the company that then owned the Fig Newton brand began experimenting with using other fruit as fillings — apples, berries and more.

It was a classic example of what business schools call brand cannibalization. They didn't sell any more cookies, just different ones. And that meant a lot fewer with figs in them. Almost overnight per capita consumption of dried figs was cut in half — from 4 ounces per person in 1994 to 2 ounces in 1995.

That was a massive hit to fig farmers, because in those days dried figs made up 98% of the harvest, with most of it going into paste for cookies. That was the moment many farmers started thinking about harvesting more fresh figs. And when they did, they had a pleasant surprise — the carrot part of the equation. Not only did they find buyers for the fresh figs, but they also found buyers who were willing to pay a premium price for them.

Depending on the variety, the market and the time of year, fresh figs can fetch as much as six times the wholesale price of dried. Even taking into account the weight lost during drying, that can work out to more than three times the money for the same piece of fruit.

Though there are hundreds of varieties of figs in the world, only four make up the vast majority of California's harvest. Three of those — Black Mission, Calimyrna and Kadota — can be used either fresh or dried. The fourth, Brown Turkey, is only sold fresh.

The Brown Turkey is the most commonly found fresh fig in Southern California: It's the one sold in the plastic boxes at the chain stores. It is not the most interesting of the varieties, but that is not to say it should be disdained. The Brown Turkey has a sweet, honeyed character. Though its figgy and fruit characteristics are mild, it's delicious.

Black Missions and Calimyrnas offer complexity that Brown Turkeys lack. The Black Mission, the oldest variety planted in California, has a definite "figginess," which translates as a kind of slight, berried bitterness that balances the honeyed sweetness in a most delicious way.

Calimyrnas are even sweeter than Black Missions, and maybe even more complex, tasting like honey and nuts.

There are other figs that are just as interesting, if not more so, though so far they are rarely seen at the market. The Adriatic, an old fig variety, has amazing flavor, though its skin is so thin it is perilous to ship fresh. The Zidi is a black fig that can be intensely sweet with a berried quality. Ischia is a green fig with a clean, tart finish.

And then there is the Panachée, which, though small in size, is certainly the most beautiful fig and perhaps also one of the most delicious. It looks like a harlequin tree ornament, teardrop shaped and vertically striped in gem-like hues of lime green and lemon yellow. Tearing it open reveals pulp the color and texture of crushed strawberries, with an intriguing hint of that flavor.

In a recent informal tasting panel sponsored by University of California researcher Gayle Crisosto, Ischia, Panachée and Zidi were the most popular of the six new fig varieties sampled (Brown Turkey, Black Mission and Calimyrna were not included). Herman has planted all three of these, but he is also high on a new variety called Sierra, which he hopes will be a self-pollinated alternative to the Calimyrna.

A wine lover, he apologizes before offering his tasting notes on the fig: "At risk of sounding like a wine geek, it reminds me of a Chardonnay — you know how they say some of them have a figgy taste? This has that, and the caramel and butterscotch too."

He has heavily planted Sierra, a gamble considering that it's a relatively unknown variety of a fruit that itself is relatively unknown. But he's counting on flavor winning out.

"Sure, it's a roll of the dice, but an educated one," Herman says. "I'd say on this one I'm playing with house money."

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