

Forbidden Fruit: Something About a Mangosteen

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BANGKOK

I'm a big-time mangosteen addict, which presents problems.

The mangosteen — a tropical fruit about the size of a tangerine, whose leathery maroon shell surrounds moist, fragrant, snow-white segments of ambrosial flesh — can't get a visa. Mangosteens may not legally be imported into the United States. They may not legally be shipped to the mainland from Hawaii, where a few sturdy souls have lately begun to grow them anyway.

Here in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, notably Vietnam and Singapore, people buy them by the bagful for small change. In Vancouver and other Canadian cities with big Asian populations, you can find them at street markets and greengrocers. In Paris, Fauchon will sell you one for a prince's if not quite a king's ransom.

But back home in Washington, the best I can do without jumping on a plane is the wooden mangosteen, handsomely carved and oiled, that sits on my desk there.

So what, you may say. What's he getting worked up about? He can gobble up papayas, mangoes and even rambutans when he gets a tropical itch. In the summer, he can eat perfectly ripe peaches, still warm from the tree, and dark, sweet plums whose juices squirt out when a tooth breaks through their taut skins.

Friends have accused me of craving mangosteens because they are beyond my reach, the way children in the old Soviet Union craved oranges. Not guilty, say I.

No other fruit, for me, is so thrillingly, intoxicatingly luscious, so evocative of the exotic East, with so precise a balance of acid and sugar, as a ripe mangosteen. I thought so when I first tasted one half a lifetime ago, in Singapore, and I've thought so ever since. I'd rather eat one than a hot fudge sundae, which for a big Ohio boy is saying a lot.

"By popular acclaim," writes the British-born Malaysian author Desmond Tate in "Tropical Fruit" (Tuttle Publishing, 2001), "the mangosteen is held to be the most delectable of all the tropical fruits, and it has been proclaimed their queen. There is no doubt about the luxury of its taste. It has won unstinted praise down the ages from all who have encountered it."

I could tell you that the flavor reminds me of litchis, peaches and clementines, mingled in a single succulent mouthful, but words can no more describe how mangosteens taste than explain why I love my wife and children. Merely typing the name makes my mouth water. Whenever in my travels I spot a mound of those precious orbs in a marketplace, my heart pounds.

For years, before she finally tasted one, I drove my wife, Betsey, almost around the bend talking about mangosteens, telling her that whatever luxurious item we were consuming at a given moment was no match for my forbidden fruit.

I'm not alone in my mania. My friend Gay Bilson, one of Australia's greatest cooks, says that the first time she cut open a mangosteen and tasted a segment, she "burst into tears at the sheer perfection of it, almost pushed to mawkish poetry."

Karen Caplan, president of Frieda's, a wholesaler of specialty produce in Los Alamitos, Calif., said she could not believe her senses at age 16 when her mother gave her a bite of a ripe mangosteen from Belize."

Queen Victoria reportedly offered a knighthood to anyone who could bring her a specimen in edible condition. Nobody ever managed to snatch the prize.

In her time, the problem was spoilage. In our day and our country, it is the Mediterranean fruit fly, which the Department of Agriculture, ever vigilant in its protection of domestic crops, does its best to stop at the borders of the continental United States. Mangosteens can be infested with the dread insect, and until recently, no safe way to assure "disinfestation," as the bureaucrats call it, had been found.

Yet there are tantalizing prospects that the gates may open, if not this year, then next year, or someday soon.

THE breakthrough, or rather the potential for one, came last October, when the government issued a ruling that all fruits and vegetables that might carry fruit flies could now be irradiated for sale in the United States.

Irradiated papayas and other fruits from Hawaii have been sold in California for several years. But the new ruling could open the huge American market to growers all over the world, and could bring mangosteens to American dinner tables at last.

Before that can happen, however, a risk assessment must be carried out for each type of fruit and each producing entity, according to Dr. I. Paul Gadh, an import specialist at the Agriculture Department's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services in Riverdale, Md., near Washington. He said he could offer no prediction on when the work on mangosteens might be completed.

Equipment to carry out irradiation, manufactured by the SureBeam Corporation of San Diego, is already in operation in Hawaii and Brazil, and a system has recently been sold to Vietnam.

Mark Stephenson, a SureBeam vice president, said that fruits (or meats, on which it is already widely used) are briefly bombarded with a stream of electrons similar to X-rays. The electron beams are generated by electrical power, he said, and no nuclear materials are used.

The process raises the temperature of the material being irradiated by only one degree, causing no change in the taste or the texture. It eliminates pests and retards spoilage by destroying harmful food-borne bacteria. But it has generated controversy.

Although approved by the American Medical Association, the American Dietetic Association, the World Health Organization and other bodies, irradiation has long been opposed by a few activist groups. The most prominent of these is Public Citizen, founded by Ralph Nader, which has contended that more detailed research is needed on the long-term results of irradiation before it can be considered safe.

"Exposing food to ionizing radiation results in the formation of potentially carcinogenic compounds," Wenonah Hauter, a Public Citizen official, told a Congressional committee in 2001. She also asserted that the process destroys crucial vitamins.

Christine M. Bruhn, director of the Center for Consumer Research at the University of California at Davis, dismissed such criticisms out of hand. "There is no indication whatsoever of any ill effects," she said, arguing that Public Citizen's views were based on outdated and irrelevant data.

"Any worries about irradiation are very small," said Michael F. Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, based in Washington. "I would welcome more research, but I haven't been exercised about this, and I'm still not."

Still, consumer resistance to irradiated foods has been high, and some supermarkets do not stock them. James Parker, director of the northern Pacific region for Whole Foods, a Texas-based chain, told The San Francisco Chronicle that he welcomed the phase-out of methyl bromide disinfestation that irradiation might help make possible, but would not carry irradiated produce.

"We don't want the cure to be worse than the disease," Mr. Parker said. "We still don't know the long-term effects."

THE mangosteen (*Garcinia mangostana*) originated, most botanists believe, in Malaysia or the Sunda Islands of Indonesia. Fruits are borne on very slow-growing evergreen trees with glossy, dark green leaves and pyramid-shaped crowns. At maturity the trees, which require high humidity and heavy rainfall, can reach 40 feet in height and yield up to 1,000 fruits a year.

Mangosteen trees can tolerate no temperature below 40 degrees Fahrenheit, which restricts their range. Outside of Southeast Asia, they have flourished in just a few places — southern India, some islands in the Caribbean (where they produce inferior fruit) and Queensland, in northeastern Australia.

They have done badly in California, worse in Florida. Commercial cultivation is in its early stages in Hawaii, on the rainy east coast of the Big Island, around the city of Hilo, where mangosteens are sold in the farmers' market.

But mangosteens have been known to American botanists for a century. In 1930, the great plant explorer David Fairchild, who lived near Miami, wrote as follows about the fruit:

"It is so delicate that it melts in the mouth like ice cream. The flavor is quite indescribably delicious. There is nothing to mar the perfection of this fruit, unless it be that the juice from the rind forms an indelible stain on a white napkin. Even the seeds are partly or wholly lacking and when present are very thin and small."

Ms. Caplan, the produce wholesaler, said she doubted that the mangosteen would match the kiwi fruit in rapid acceptance in the United States. But once available, she predicted, it would gain immediate popularity among Asian-Americans, with the remainder of the population following along later, perhaps in seven or eight years.

For the most part, mangosteens are eaten out of hand. (A real fan has trouble getting them home; they tend to disappear in the car on the way from the market.)

In southern Thailand, around Phuket, Thais use green mangosteens in a vegetarian curry. In Goa, they are used in a fish curry. Like soursops, a more fibrous fruit with a similar taste, they make a rich, heady sorbet.

In his encyclopedic "Thai Food" (Ten Speed Press, 2002), David Thompson includes an enticing recipe for beef and mangosteen soup. Anyone for mangosteen margaritas?

Lore and legend seem to follow this fabulous fruit wherever it goes.

One Sunday morning at Bangkok's rich Aw Taw Kaw open-air market, Bob Halliday, an American writer and translator who has lived in Thailand for 35 years, showed me how to pick the best ones.

"Squeeze them," he advised, as he did just that. "They should yield to pressure, and should have no hard spots. The darker the color the better the taste."

At the stem end, mangosteens have four waxy sepals. At the other, they have four to eight flat, woody lobes, arranged in a pretty rosette. That much I had known. What I had not known, and what Mr. Halliday told me, is that the number of those lobes corresponds exactly to the number of fruit segments arranged inside as exquisitely as the jewels inside a Fabergé egg.

Dubious, I bought and then cut open five or six mangosteens right then and there, strictly in the spirit of scientific inquiry, of course. He was right.

On another day, in another market, Aun Koh, a young Singaporean photographer, explained to me the Chinese belief that the primary forces influencing bodily health are heat and coolness.

In this balance between yin and yang, mangosteens supply the cool element to offset the heat of the other most-loved Southeast Asian fruit, the huge, spiky durian, whose foul aroma would stun a goat. Many Asians therefore like to consume the two fruits at the same time.

"We describe the mangosteen as the queen of fruits," he reminded me. "We call the durian the king."

Well, I for one have always preferred the company of ladies.

BRING ON THE RAIN

Mangosteens flourish in areas of very high humidity, like Southeast Asia.



Brian Palmer for The New York Times