

Mangga

That's mango in Tagalog. Scientific name *mangifera indica*. It is the best tasting fruit in the world. The beautiful, delicious, juicy, splendiferous mango. Borrowing a word from an author you'll meet later, it's ambrosial. There is no other fruit like it. Apples, apricots, cantaloupes, kiwi, oranges, peaches, plums, watermelons, any of the berries, or perhaps the odiferous durian does not compare to the mango. There are other tropical fruits in the Philippines, several of which are in season at any time of the year – *atis* (sugar apple), *avocado*, *caimito* (star apple), *duhat* (Java plum), *guava*, *langka* (breadfruit, of HMS Bounty fame), *lanzones*, *mabolo* (velvet apple), *papaya*, *pineapple*, *rambutan* (similar to lychee), *sampaloc* (tamarind), *santol* (cotton fruit), etc. I could fill this page up. There are fruits in the Philippines that you'll find nowhere else in the world. But there is nothing like the mango, although we cannot claim an exclusive. Now grown extensively throughout Asia and Latin American, the mango is native to India.

The Wall Street Journal recently had a feature on the mango, penned by an Indian writer named Chandrahas Choudhury. I would have loved to be in his shoes. How would you like going around India for a fortnight, tasting varieties of mangoes, and getting paid to do it? He beat me to the punch, but I learned a lot of information about the mango that never occurred to me. According to author Choudhury, there are 1,663 varieties of mango, 1,000 of which are found only in India. India is the Goliath of the mango producing world. They grow more than 18 million tons a year, half of the world's total, more than the next half dozen producers combined. After all, India is a big country with the mango originating in the northeast. That's the area bounded by Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

We sometimes buy mango from Jungle Jim's, that famous mother of all grocery stores in Fairfield, OH. They stock hundreds of brands of beer, wine and cheese. They probably have the last cigar store in southern Ohio, complete with walk in humidior. But back to the mangoes. Jungle Jim's imports mangoes mostly from Mexico, occasionally from Haiti or some other Latin American country. We've tried just about every brand from every one of those countries. They were all found wanting, compared to Filipino mangoes. They don't have the sweetness, they're fibrous, ripening unevenly. They can't seem to strike a balance between unripe, ripe and rotten, all in the same fruit. Maybe they don't like the Ohio weather. You can settle for mango ice cream, which Jungle Jim's sells. It is made by Magnolia, the Manila based ice cream maker. Ben & Jerry's has a mango sorbet.

Before fully ripening, the mango is quite sour. But there are Filipinos who love to eat the unripe "green" mango, flavored with *bagoong*, a condiment made from fermented fish or shrimp. The mangoes can also be pickled in brine, called *burong mangga*. To me, both are desecrations. Nature will make them sweet. You don't have to wait long. Why circumvent nature's plan? Anecdotally, raw mangoes are supposedly the favorite of women in early pregnancy.

You can buy mango products in various forms - juice, puree, shakes, ice cream, dried, etc. The dried ones can be plain or coated with dark chocolate, which you can buy in bulk at Costco. Practically all dried mangoes sold in the U.S. comes from the island of Cebu. Gourmet chocolate mangoes in fancy packaging have found its way into Manila's malls and department stores. But nothing beats the fresh fruit.

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One of our daughters lives in Cape Coral, FL. West of the town is Pine Island, home to a large mango farm. I have no ambition, wish or desire to move to Florida, but if there's one thing that would change my mind, it is to have a little land with lots of mango trees. They even have a mango festival in Coral Gables, FL, south of Miami. There's a festival in, where else - India. Not to be outdone, there's mango festivals in the Philippines. One is in my mother's home province of Zambales. The Zambaleños claim to have the best mangoes. There is only one way to settle this dispute. A mango tasting contest, the Olympics of mangoes. Let's invite the Indians, Chinese, Thais, Mexicans, etc. Even the Floridians. I volunteer to be a judge. Some contests have already occurred although there is no official one, with every country making a claim. But the Sweet Elena from Zambales has already made it to the record books. The 1995 edition of Guinness called the Sweet Elena the sweetest in the world. But 1995 is a long time ago in mango years. Dozens of hybrids have probably been created since then.

What's the secret to the delectability of the mango? Sugar! One mango has more than 40 grams of sugar, double the amount in a Snickers bar. That's twice as much as a cup of grapes or three bananas. Berries are way down the list. Avocado has the least amount of sugar, that's why it has to be spiced up in making guacamole. Sugar or no, I'll take my mango and eat it too.

Whenever I visit my sister in the Philippines and it's mango season, she makes sure every meal is followed by a mango. In the center of the mango is a large seed. Most people will slice the mango on both sides of the seed, leaving two parts which contain most of the flesh. Just scoop it out with a teaspoon. The dainty eater leaves the seed alone. I love to gnaw on the seed, letting the juice run down my chin. Another way is to peel the skin. It will be the messiest fruit you'll ever eat, but worth the experience. Consuming this many mangoes plus other goodies means I ingest around 100 grams of sugar daily during my visits. That includes leche flan, bananas in syrup, halo-halo, etc. Then my sister wonders why I am so hyper.

There is a bizarre chapter in mango history that occurred in China. The Foreign Minister of Pakistan gifted then Chairman Mao a basket of mangoes. Mao didn't like them, so he regifted the mangoes to factory workers who were then battling the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. This gifting to the workers was hugely symbolic and the then obscure (to the Chinese) fruit became an object of adulation*. A few years later, Philippine First Lady Imelda Marcos gave mangoes to Chairman and Madame Mao. This was a year before Mao's passing, with no word on whether he had changed his mind about mangoes. Fast forward 45 years and China has become the #2 producer after India. But I bet Sweet Elena is still the sweetest.

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Mangoes at my sister's dinner table in Quezon City.

*The University of Chicago Press Books published a book about this episode in Chinese history, titled "Mao's Golden Mangoes and the Cultural Revolution", edited by art historian Alfreda Murck.

