Oranges: A Brief Taster

Clarissa Hyman

There are two types of oranges; a bitter or Seville, and a range of sweet oranges for eating out of hand or turning into juice. In the beginning oranges were first used for the fragrance of their rind, and were valued as perfume or flavorings. According to The Oxford Companion to Food (Alan Davidson, Oxford University Press, 1999) there are now 6 main categories of oranges in cultivation: the common Sweet orange; Blood oranges; Naval oranges; Acidless oranges; Pera oranges; and Jaffa oranges.

My friend Clarissa Hyman has written some wonderful, beautifully illustrated cookbooks. Her newest is Oranges: A Global History. This small book on our most popular fruit is a real treasure. Clarissa Hyman is an award-winning freelance food and travel writer based in the United Kingdom. She is twice-winner of the coveted Glenfiddich Food Writer of the Year award. She has written four books and her latest, “Oranges: A Global History”, was recently published in the UK and the US by Reaktion. Her website is: www.clarissahyman.co.uk

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Oranges may not be the only fruit, but the world would be drabber without them. The classic fruit of the cold months, the joyful orbs shine brightly through the murk and gloom; one can appreciate the lure of 1950s advertisements for juicy Jaffa oranges on grimy London buses trundling through the grey city streets.

Natural signifiers of health, well-being and aesthetic pleasure, the orange is the capo of the citrus family, and the exotic Seville and the ravishing, marbled blood orange are the golden girls, their innate attractions enhanced by the part they play in the history of this most fascinating of fruits.

The orange route to the West and the Americas was lengthy and complex, originating in China and the Eastern Himalayas. The sour or bitter orange was the first to make the journey and was initially used for either simple seasoning or ornamental purposes. It was probably in the Holy Land that warriors, pilgrims and merchants learnt how citrus could be used as a condiment to enhance the bland and salty staple foods of the North.

Renaissance cooks used the fruit, peel and juice in the same ostentatious way they would all precious commodities. The first written recipe for bitter oranges in German dates from 1485, when they are described as
“small, sour apples from Italy” to be cooked with wine and cinnamon as a sauce for poultry and game. Partridge with orange became such a culinary cliché that a political pamphlet of 1594 made the pithy charge, ‘A Spaniard without a Jesuit is like a partridge without an orange.’ The theme was reprise in 19th century France when ducklings à la bigarade were described as ‘...a dish for an epicure of the daintiest palate’, around the same time as the début of that other celebrated orange dish, Crêpes Suzette.

Today, the Seville orange is largely reserved for marmalade-making: the British are the greatest consumers of a crop that otherwise would largely go to waste, although they do make a distinctive appearance in Cadiz fish soup. In Latin America, the juice of the sour orange is often used as a marinade, a practice that dates back to the Columbus Exchange.

Orangemania grew rapidly once the sweet orange reached European shores, despite the fact it either had to be expensively imported or cultivated in ‘orangeries’. Conspicuous consumption was the name of the game. In 1529, the Archbishop of Milan served a banquet of several hundred dishes that included: salad of herbs and citron cut into the initials of guests’ names and their coats of arms; caviar fried with oranges covered with sugar and cinnamon; fried sardines with oranges; a thousand oysters with oranges and pepper; salad of lobster tails and citrons; sturgeon in orange jelly; sparrows fried with oranges; orange fritters with sugar and cinnamon . . . on, and on, into citrus infinity. Sweet oranges were used in puddings, creamy concoctions, sauces, cakes and biscuits. Trade boomed.

Oranges were introduced to the New World by the Spanish and Portuguese explorers in the 16th century. On his second voyage in 1493, Christopher Columbus brought citrus seeds to Haiti and the Caribbean. In the warm, damp climate of the West Indies, the trees multiplied rapidly. Soon they ran wild throughout the islands, Mexico and Brazil. Andrew Marvell vividly described the trees in Bermuda as “feral” where “hangs in shades the orange bright, like golden lamps in a green light.” By the 17th century, limes and oranges were being shipped back to Europe from the New World - well before the advent of the steamship.

Oranges were probably brought to Florida in the first half of the 16th century. Commercial plantings were insignificant until the 19th century when the US acquired Florida, and the subsequent development of refrigerated steamships and the building of the railroads. By 1871 a Dr Baldwin wrote: “You may eat oranges from morning to night at every plantation along the shore (of the St Johns) while the wild trees, bending with their golden fruit over the water, present an enchanting appearance.”

The orange reached California with the founding of the San Diego mission in 1769, and by the end of the 19th century, citrus was a key factor in promoting a lifestyle image of sunshine and easy living to attract settlers to the state. Subsequently, California,
Florida and Brazil emerged as giants of citriculture: Valencia oranges, renowned for their juice, were to become the foundation of a vast, multi-national OJ industry.

Beauty remains, as an Arab poet once described, “like blazing fire amongst the emerald boughs.”

Recipes

CITRUS MARINADE
In the sixteenth century, one Italian traveler to the Molucca Islands wrote about the cannibals of a certain island who, as quoted in Tolkowsky’s Hesperides: A History of the culture and Use of Citrus Fruits, ‘eat no other part of the human body but the heart; uncooked but seasoned with the juice of oranges and lemons.’ I suggest this marinade be used for seafood or salmon instead.

9 oz. fresh orange juice
5 oz. fresh lemon juice
3 1/2 oz. olive oil
2-3 cloves of garlic, finely chopped
1 tablespoon grated orange zest
fresh coriander, chopped

Combine all the ingredients except the coriander and marinate the seafood in the mixture for 30 minutes before grilling or frying. Brush with the marinade a few times while it cooks. Sprinkle with the coriander before serving. Serves 4.

ORANGE JULIUS
Clarissa remembers this as a nostalgic American childhood favourite. It takes me back to hot days, waiting in line (with 2 impatient kids) at the mall for this cool, refreshing treat. I thought they had disappeared, but saw a stand at the neighbourhood mall recently.

9 oz. fresh or reconstituted frozen orange juice
2 oz. milk
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
2 tablespoons sugar
1 scoop vanilla ice cream
handful of ice cubes

Blend all the ingredients until smooth and serve in chilled glasses. If the mixture is too thick, add more juice or water; if too thin, add more ice or ice cream.