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Market Watch: Fresh dates — Barhi, Medjool and more

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Barhi variety dates at the khalal, or firm, stage of ripeness, grown by Bautista... (David Karp / For The Times)

Dates can keep in refrigeration for years and are available year-round, but the freshly harvested fruits, which started showing up last week, are far superior in texture and flavor, and are one of the great seasonal treats available at Southern California farmers markets.

Most distinctive is the Barhi variety, picked at what is known in Arabic as the *khalal* stage of maturity, when it is yellow, firm and crunchy, with a flavor of coconut, sugarcane and cinnamon. Most of the leading date varieties, such as Medjool and Deglet Noor, are high in tannins at this stage and thus too astringent to eat with pleasure. But when properly mature — that is, bright yellow, without any greenish tinge — Barhi has just a touch of astringency, which complements its sweetness.