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City Kitchen

The Pleasures of Persimmons in Fall

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PERSIMMONS are prized worldwide for their sweet, mellow flavor and their haunting beauty, whether they are observed in a fruit bowl or hanging from a branch. But there are no doubt still some American home cooks who haven't the faintest idea what to do with them. Not that there's anything wrong with good old Yankee persimmon pudding, but there are lots of other options.



In all discussions of persimmons and how to eat them, the two names you need to know are Fuyu and Hachiya. Though there are many more types of persimmons, thousands actually, these are the two that are commonly sold here, and there is a key difference between them.

The Fuyu, round and squat and rather tomato-shaped, is the kind you can eat raw. You want to buy the ones that have turned truly orange (if they are greenish-gold, let them ripen for a few days), then peel them and slice them. The flesh is firm but sweet. Eat them plain, in the Japanese fashion, with a pot of tea. Fuyus persimmons make wonderful salads, too.

On the other hand, the long, pointy, heart-shaped Hachiya type can only be consumed raw after it has ripened to utter softness. If you tried to taste a slice of firm, raw Hachiya, you'd immediately discover what is meant, in persimmon terminology, by the word "astringent." They are highly tannic, puckery, sour, cottony and basically extremely unpleasant.

Hachiya persimmons, then, are always left to ripen until they are rather like a purée, at which point they become wonderfully sweet, and can be split and eaten with a spoon.

Or you can turn ripe Hachiya pulp into marvelous dense and sticky autumn desserts, dark and spicy. (Not to confuse things, but Fuyus can also be cooked if left to soften in the same way.)

For now, I recommend sticking with Fuyus. They're abundant, easy to use and quite versatile, adapting to and complementing all kinds of ingredients, both sweet and savory.

The salad I made the other day veered Italian, with lemon, olive oil, radicchio and Parmesan. Because I have a basketful of persimmons on the counter, I'll surely make at least one with endives, roasted walnuts and balsamic vinegar, and a gingery one with watercress.

In fact, I intend to eat quite a few persimmons over the next couple of months. It's the same way I felt about tomatoes, back when the sun was shining, just last season.