

Los Angeles Times

FOOD

There's a new taste for quince

By David Karp

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Neglected for decades, the quince seems an improbable candidate for revival today, when consumers demand sweet, ready-to-eat fresh fruit. Why is it, then, that in recent years three books of quince recipes and lore have appeared, the fruit increasingly is featured at high-end restaurants, and half a dozen of these have even been named after it?

"The quince is the poster child of 'Slowness,'" suggests Ben Watson, an author and food activist who organized a tasting of quince varieties for Slow Food's Ark of Taste committee. "It's lovely and fragrant but pretty much inedible unless transformed by peeling, coring and cooking. I think it is poised for a comeback."



It certainly is a paradoxical fruit, both homely and voluptuous, like a large, knobbly, fuzzy pear. Raw, it is typically so hard, sour and astringent that in Turkey, the world's largest producer, "to eat the quince" is slang meaning "to get into serious trouble." But it has an intense, alluring aroma -- reminiscent of pineapple, guava, Bartlett pear and vanilla -- and when cooked, its flesh softens and turns a gorgeous translucent pink.

The quince is a pome fruit related to apples and pears, native to the Transcaucasus area. It is most commonly grown in western Asia, southeastern Europe and parts of Latin America for use in preserves, compotes, condiments and stews.

Spanish padres planted a few quince trees at California missions, but cultivation took off only with the arrival of American nurserymen and farmers in the mid-19th century. The great plant breeder Luther Burbank observed in 1914 that "the soil and climate of California are peculiarly hospitable to this fruit" because of its long, warm, dry growing season. At the time there were about 900 acres of quince grown here, and that was just a small fraction of the nation's plantings.

Quince was popular because its high pectin content made it ideal for making jams and jellies, but its cultivation faded away with the use of powdered pectin, the decline in home preserving and the increased prevalence of fire blight, a bacterial disease that can quickly wipe out an orchard.

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Today California is the only U.S. state that grows commercial quantities of quince, and there are only about 300 acres, mostly in the San Joaquin Valley. The harvest runs from mid-August to early November, and the fruit, which stores well, is sold through January; small shipments from Chile come in from March to May.

Careful harvesting

The quince's aroma develops fully only when it is picked yellow-ripe, but commercial growers usually harvest when the fruit is greenish-yellow so it will ship and store better. Workers wearing cotton gloves pick the fruit gently and put it into small plastic totes, because even though quinces seem hard, they bruise easily. Packing is simple: Workers sort out the culls and discard them, rub off the fuzz from the good fruit with a soft cloth (to keep mold from developing in storage) and wrap them in protective tissues.

The carotenoid molecules that give quince its yellow color break down into compounds, notably lactones and rose-scented ionones, that impart the fruit's pungent floral aroma. Phenolic chemicals in raw quince flesh coagulate proteins in your mouth, causing the fruit to taste astringent; but when it is cooked for a long time, heat and acidity convert these compounds to anthocyanins, so the pulp loses its astringency and turns a pleasing pink.

Many quince growers are of Armenian ancestry. Herbert Kaprielian of Reedley, Calif., the longtime "King of Quince," who turns 80 today, remembers that when he started growing the fruit in the 1950s "every Armenian-owned farm had at least one quince tree." At first he shipped mainly to Greeks, Italians and Jews on the East Coast, then starting in the 1970s, Latino customers became increasingly important. Marketers now estimate that about three-quarters of the crop goes to ethnic groups familiar with quince from their homelands.

The leading variety in California is Pineapple, a smooth, roundish fruit that's early-maturing and relatively tender. In fact, Luther Burbank, who introduced it in 1899, claimed that it "when thoroughly ripe rivals the apple as a fruit to be eaten raw." I always considered this nonsense, but last year when I picked some Pineapples in early November, they were indeed soft and juicy enough to be fairly palatable.

Ripening in mid-season, Smyrna, brought from western Anatolia in 1897, is large and pear-shaped, with heavy brown fuzz. It's the favorite of quince aficionados for its intense aroma but grown on limited acreage because of its susceptibility to fire blight. Latest and largest of all is Golden, also known as Cooke's Jumbo, a blocky-shaped fruit, possibly a chance genetic mutation of Smyrna, selected by Kaprielian's father in the 1960s.

Since the days of Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder, anecdotal and scientific reports have described dessert varieties of quince that are delicious to eat fresh, but whenever I encountered such fruits they tasted more like furniture than food. Eventually I came to view such accounts as apocryphal.

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A backyard favorite

Then in 1997, I met a retired computer engineer named Edgar Valdivia at a California Rare Fruit Growers conference. He said he had a sweet-fleshed quince tree in his yard in Simi Valley, derived from cuttings imported by a friend from the Majes Valley of southern Peru, where it's too warm for most apples and pears to grow well but where quinces flourish. The next day he brought in a round yellow fruit that indeed had typical quince aroma, ribbing and light fuzz -- but was softer, juicier and non-astringent, and quite pleasant to eat.

Since then the variety has become increasingly popular among Southern California backyard growers. At least one farmers market vendor, Alex Weiser, has ordered trees, but it remains to be seen how the variety will fare commercially.

A friend sent budwood of this tree to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's fruit collection in Corvallis, Ore., where, much to my surprise, the quince curator, Joseph Postman, called the variety Karp's Sweet quince, naming it after me. As grown in the Northwest, however, it might better be named Karp's Sour; the variety needs California's heat and long growing season to ripen properly.

In Corvallis, Postman maintains an orchard of more than 100 quince clones, many of which he and other USDA scientists collected in recent expeditions to the fruit's homeland in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

When I visited, some of the varieties were fruiting for the first time, and a few seemed remarkably tender and non-astringent, especially given the area's cool climate; others were early-ripening, showing promise that they might be suitable for growing commercially in the Northwest, where autumn rains, which can crack and rot quince, often arrive before standard varieties ripen. With the USDA collection and several nurseries and farms growing exotic varieties, the area is already a crucible of quince enthusiasm.

Fruits, like stocks and clothes, are ruled by the inscrutable laws of fashion. Quince may never regain its status as a major player, but in today's food world, it's so out it's in.

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