

Los Angeles Times FOOD

The medlar, an exotic taste of the past

The storied fruit with a rich, mellow flavor is now being produced commercially in California.

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Reporting from Twin Oaks, Calif. — —

Forty miles east of Bakersfield, in this remote, sparsely settled valley, an orchard rises from the arid scrubland like a medieval vision. It bears a peculiar fruit steeped in history and literature but so obscure that few Americans have heard of it, and whose very name evokes both curiosity and derision. It is California's own medlar orchard, whose crop is arriving in Los Angeles this week.

The medlar, which resembles a russeted crabapple with an open blossom end, is a pome fruit, kin to apples and pears, and most closely related to hawthorns. It is hard, dry and astringent when immature, but after a mysterious ripening process called bletting, its cell walls break down, its tannins are reduced, and its pulp turns brown and custardy. It tastes like winy, sweet-tart apple butter laced with cinnamon, with a spicy mellow richness all its own.



Like fugu and absinthe, the medlar's metaphorical notoriety far exceeds its culinary significance. Its homely appearance gave rise to derisory nicknames such as "open-arse" in Tudor English and "cul-de-chien" ("dog butt") in French. Although bletting does not involve any pathogens or decay, the process has often been considered akin to rotting. Chaucer, in the prologue to "The Reeve's Tale," wrote that the medlar is not edible "til it be roten," and Henry Phillips, in his "Pomarium Britannicum" (1821), deemed its ripening a "putrefactive fermentation." D.H. Lawrence poignantly expressed this view when he called medlars "Wineskins of brown morbidity / ... The distilled essence of hell / The exquisite odour of leave taking."

An ancient fruit

Native to the Caucasus, northern Iran and Asia Minor, medlars were cultivated by the ancient Greeks and Romans, and subsequently spread throughout Europe, where they were popular from the Middle Ages through early modern times. It was only in the 20th century, when more convenient late-ripening fruits became abundant, that medlars fell from favor in Europe.

Medlars were introduced to California in the 19th century, but have never been cultivated commercially here. There is a limited demand, however, from immigrants familiar with them from their homelands, such as Iran, where medlars, called azgil, grow wild in the forests near the Caspian Sea and are sold in street-corner carts.

Dino Bonyadi, a dentist of Armenian heritage, learned to love the fruit as a child in Iran, and longed for it after he came to the United States at age 12. He sold his practice in Burbank in 2003, and with his wife, Jenna Michaud-Bonyadi, bought a 20-acre ranch in Twin Oaks, an unincorporated area of Kern County at an elevation of about 3,500 feet. The following year, they planted 80 medlar trees (60 survive) of four different varieties. The couple named the property Honey Bear Ranch, after a beloved dog, marketed the fruit by mail order and made it into excellent preserves. Even when the trees were small and just starting to bear, Dino Jenna dreamed of building a thriving medlar business.

After the downturn in the economy, however, they sold the property to Ron Murrey, an Orange County resident who was primarily interested in it as a horse ranch but was intrigued by the commercial possibilities of the medlar plantings. Last season, he sold the crop through a wholesaler to ethnic markets in Los Angeles.

This year, he is working with a neighbor in Twin Oaks, Craig Ruggless, a chef and horticulturist whose [Winnetka Farms](#) sells Italian heirloom produce and seeds raised in the western San Fernando Valley. To market the medlars, Ruggless recruited a partner — Tara Kolla of [Silver Lake Farms](#), who grows microgreens and flowers and runs a community-supported agriculture operation.

Bletting medlars

The trickiest part of appreciating medlars, especially for novices, is making sure the fruit is properly bletted. If left there long enough, medlars will blet on the tree, particularly if they have been kissed by frost. Sometimes, though, they fall off the tree or are devoured by wildlife first. The alternative is to harvest the fruits firm and try to blet them off the tree, ideally by placing them stems-down on wooden trays covered with straw and storing them in a cool, humid cellar for several weeks. Only about a third of this season's crop has bletted on the trees so far; Kolla and Ruggless will sell the fruits both bletted and unbletted, though they have not yet determined the price.

In Europe, medlars traditionally have been considered a prime Christmas dessert. Bletted medlars may be eaten out of hand, or with cream. They can also be baked, stewed or roasted, or served with game. The great English oenophile George Saintsbury wrote in "Notes on a Cellar-Book" (1920): "The one fruit which seems to me to go best with all wine, from hock to sherry and from claret to port, is the Medlar."

Fast food this is not, and the challenges are considerable, but that's part of the appeal of this legendary fruit.

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