



A FRUIT DIVINE



The Mango

This is the **king of fruits**, the delicious expression of a rich natural heritage. From its beginnings in the mists of time to its exalted status. today, the mango has come to enjoy a distinctive standing socially, religiously, culturally and economically. It has a special place in the very ethos of the country.

The story of this fruit goes back four thousands and more, mentioned as it is in ancient Hindu scriptures. However, the exact place of its origin is debatable. Most researches agree that wild mango existed as far back as 2,000 B.C.E. in modern Siam, Burma, Indo-China, and the Malay Peninsula. Wild mango trees, bearing small, fibrous fruit with a turpentine-like taste, are still found in the forests of these regions. Fossil records indicate that the common Indian mango, *Mangifera indica*, probably first appear in present day Assam in the later part of the Quaternary period. In the early stages of evolution, the fruit was small, fibrous, and almost acidic in taste, but centuries of selecting the best plants, and mixing desirable traits through vegetative propagation, resulted in the “mango” fruit we know today – large, fleshy, flavour-filled, and central to cuisine during the summer months.

The word “Mango” has its origins in Sanskrit. In Assam, the fruit was known just by its Sanskrit name “aamam.” Later when the tree was introduced into the plains of India, it was called “aamphal,” in Hindi. On reaching southern India, where Tamil dominated, the word somehow got distorted into “maangkai.” The Malayalam-speaking population of south India further modified it into “manga.” When Vasco da Gama arrived in Calicut on May 20, 1498, with his fleet on ships, he was fascinated not just with the silk, gems, and spices in the markets but also the mango fruit, then in season. A Portuguese official on Vasco da Gama’s ship, in a letter to an Englishman, wrote about the “manga” fruit. The Englishman misread it as “mango” and the word stuck.

The outward journey of the mango began well before the Portuguese came to India. In 632 C.E. Huen Tsang, a Chinese traveller, visited India and took the mango tree back to China where its cultivation began, both as a fruit and ornamental plant. There are also records of the Caliphs of Baghdad enjoying an intoxicating drink made from



mango (a brew fermented for almost a year) as far back as the 7th century. From Persia, caravans, most likely, carried the mango to Africa around 1,000 C.E. It was almost five centuries later that the Portuguese carried the mango from India to Europe, East Africa, and Brazil. From Brazil it was introduced to the West Indies and from there to Jamaica and, in the last century, to Mexico. The tree thrived in every tropical and sub-tropical region it was introduced in as long as there were periods of good rainfall followed by hot, dry summers.

India's climate, with its monsoon followed by dry winters and hot, dry summers, is perfect for the mango. The tree is grown everywhere from sea level to an altitude of 1,400 meters, but the best fruit come from the fertile alluvial soils of the Gangetic plains and the red coastal soils whose higher acidic content is ideal for the mango. The tree is quite hardy but sensitive to prolonged periods of temperatures below five degrees centigrade and to rain and frost during the flowering period. Frost damages the flowers and rain washes out the pollen and makes the plant vulnerable to mould and pest infestation.

The tree, if allowed, can grow as high as 60 feet and live for hundreds of years. 'The largest tree in India probably stands on the property of Narasimha Raju Yadav in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.' Yadav, now more than eighty, does not know how old the tree is but says its canopy covers about half an acre of his property. Canopies can easily spread to more than 100 feet and offer a dense, cool shade under which people in rural areas seek refuge from the relentless sun. The leaves of the mango are deep green and leathery with a distinct turpentine-like smell when crushed.



Mango Tree Blooms

From late November to February, the trees burst into bloom – sprays of white flowers visited by fruit bats, flies, wasps, butterflies, moths, and wild bees. Male flowers are more profuse, small and slender while female flowers are fewer, larger, with a distinct bulging ovary. Wind and insects aid pollination and within weeks, the flowers disappear and the trees become laden with green fruit that ripen into shades of yellow and orange changing the summer landscape into a collage of colour. In south India, fruits start entering the market in mid-April and mango fever reaches its highest pitch in May, winding down in June with few late stragglers appearing in the markets, commanding high prices. The northern summer is later than the southern and the mango season in north India is 6-8 weeks later than the south.



Through the centuries farmers have used vegetative propagation to mix desirable traits of different plants to create new varieties. In fact, mango is grown not from its seed but the 'root stock' to which limbs of desirable trees are grafted. If seeds are planted, they will grow into trees that revert back to the wild variety producing fibrous, small fruit. Today, India has more than 1,000 varieties of mango, though only a few dozen are cultivated commercially. The most popular is perhaps the Alphonso, nicknamed the "King of Mangoes," known for its firm, sweet flesh and distinct flavour. But every Indian has his or her own favourite variety – it could be a more commercial variety like Dasehari, Neelum, Totapuri, or Kesari or it could be a variety available in just a particular village. In fact, mango aficionados will even tell you that a particular tree from a particular farm has the best fruit.



Mango Tree

For many of India's kings, flavourful, disease-resistant mangoes were a status symbol and the ways to grow these fruits, closely guarded secrets. Kings stole limbs of desirable trees from other kings to graft on to their own trees. Emperors bribed and kidnapped gardeners from neighbouring kingdoms and stole secrets of how to grow a coveted variety of fruit. During season, Kings threw lavish "mango parties" to showcase their best fruit.

Early in the season, mouth-watering green mangoes are eaten raw, sprinkled with salt and chilli powder, or ground into chutney with a mixture of spices, or converted into panaaha, a paste made by mixing steamed raw mango with jaggery and cardamom seeds, a dollop of which makes the most refreshing drink. Green mangoes are dried and ground into a powder, amchur, used to add a dash of sourness to food through the year. Each region in India has its own signature raw mango pickle and every family has its own special recipe to be passed down to the next generation. Children are cautioned not to eat too much raw fruit; the sour acidity can gnaw into teeth making them sensitive. But that doesn't deter them from getting their hands on some green mangoes, chewing on their sourness and building their store of summer memories.

Later in the season, ripe fruit are used in almost every meal. Sliced as breakfast fruit, as aam ras with pooran poli during meals, and mango milkshake and ice cream in the hot afternoons. In north and northeast India, mango pulp is dried into thick layers of moist "mango jelly" that can be stored and enjoyed long after the season ends. But these are all civilized ways of consuming the fruit and almost every Indian carries at least one memory of eating a mango the traditional, and very messy, way – by sucking



out the juice through the aperture where the stem was, then squeezing out the seed, eating it clean, and discarding the skin and seed in a pile by the plate. To keep a supply of mangoes coming through the season, families buy raw fruit and ripen them on a straw bed in their homes. It is this characteristic smell of ripening mangoes, made stronger by the heat, which assaults the senses during the summer months.

Research in the past few decades has revealed significant health benefits of the mango, increasing its appeal as a gastronomic delight. The raw mango is rich in vitamin C and the ripe fruit is rich in iron, magnesium, potassium, and beta-carotenes. Mangoes are also rich in phenols that have anticancer and antioxidant properties. The fruit, like others, is low in protein but high in fibre. An infusion made of tender leaves is said to be helpful in controlling diabetes, a powder of dry seeds controls diarrhoea, and the bark is anti-inflammatory and used to treat wounds.

The mango is also capable of harm, and its ill effects have changed the course of India's history more than once. In 327 B.C.E. when Alexander the Great began his invasion of India he had to order his army to retreat. His soldier had indulged in too much raw mango causing dysentery to break out among the ranks. The culprit was most likely urushiol, the resinous sap oozing from freshly-picked fruit, which is an irritant. If mango fruit are not washed well this sap can cause a severe skin rash around the mouth. Interestingly, the plant family that mango belongs to, Anacardiaceae, also includes poison ivy, cashew, and sumac, all of which produce urushiol.

In India, the mango is the centre of religion and superstition, honed and modified over the centuries. Indians believe that the tree brings good fortune and love, which is why a thorana or garland of leaves is strung across doorways during festivals and happy occasions. The use of mango leaves in decorations during social functions, where crowds gather and the air becomes heavy with carbon dioxide, stemmed from the belief that mango leaves could purify air as they lasted longer than other plucked leaves. The Buddha apparently rested and preached under a mango tree in a grove presented by the courtesan Amrapali of Vaishali. In fact, Buddha's favourite place was a mango grove called Pavarika at Nalanda University and because of its strong association with Buddha; people believe that the mango tree can grant wishes.

During poojas, the leaves are used in a kalash, a water-filled pot into whose mouth a coconut is inserted on a bed of leaves. The pot signifies the earth, the water the life-giver, the leaves vibrant life, the coconut the seat of consciousness and together, they serve as a seat for the invoked deity. The worship of the goddess of learning, Saraswati, is incomplete without mango leaves and it is believed that Lord Shiva appeared in his Lingam form below a mango tree. The celestial nymph, Urvashi, was created by sage Narayana from mango juice. Still another story is of Surya Bai, the beautiful daughter of the Sun God who marries a great king. To escape the wrath of a sorceress also in love with the king, Surya Bai turns herself into a lotus flower. The king falls in love with the flower and the enraged sorceress burns it. From the ashes springs a mango tree and from the tree falls a ripe fruit. Surya Bai emerges from the fruit to be united again with her king.

The popular paisley design, with its characteristic teardrop shape, represents the mango fruit and was used to decorate fabric and buildings in India for centuries before it appeared in other parts of the world. When the British colonized India, they began exporting paisley-patterned fabric to Europe. The fabric was very expensive but the pattern quickly became popular and British craftsmen began producing imitation fabrics with the paisley design. In the forefront of this manufacturing was the Scottish



town of Paisley and the design, though known in Sanskrit as mankolam, became known to the rest of the world as “paisley”.

The mango’s significance to Indians is more than simply cultural and historical. For a country that produces about 66 percent of the world’s mango, this fruit has great economic significance. The total area in India under mango exceeds 20 lakh hectares, according to the National Horticulture Board, and the country produces about 140 lakh metric tons of the fruit. Still, very little is exported because of import restrictions by other countries.



Mango Harvested



Packed in wooden boxes



Mango Graded



Mango Market