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An Old Friend Without The Wrinkles

By NICK FOX

THEY have the crunch and juiciness of a Granny Smith apple, but they can be as sweet as honey. Hard, yellow and hanging from a withered stem, they don't look like any fruit that most Americans have seen.

But the taste is familiar, just like a date.

And that's what they are: dates, fresh off the tree, unlike the brown, soft, dried ones that are widely sold. Their two- to three-month season is just beginning.

Hard yellow dates are loved by millions in the Middle East, But Ben Laflin, 83, said he also enjoyed them as a boy on his family's date farm in the Coachella Valley of California. He began developing a market for the yellow dates after he offered some to Tadros Tadros, a friend and an Egyptian date farmer.

"I said 'It's beautiful,'" Mr. Tadros recalled. "He said, 'Are you sure? Because for us, it's considered not ripe.' I said, 'There are a lot of ethnic people who love to have the fruit in that stage.'"

In the 15 or 20 years since the two men began selling them, fresh dates have remained obscure. Only one variety grown commercially in the United States -- Barhi -- can be eaten fresh. Of the 6,000 acres of date trees in the Coachella Valley, the center of the nation's date industry, only 40 are planted with Barhis, said Sam Aslan, an Agriculture Department conservationist in Indio, Calif.

The two major date varieties, Medjools and Deglet Noors, are full of tannins and must mellow with age before they can be eaten.

Even in the Barhis, a stem can have both sugary jewels -- usually the deepest yellow, with a spot of brown -- that will make you smack your lips, and others that will make you pucker up.

"I spend a lot of time talking to people who've never tried them before," said Robert Lower of Thermal, Calif., who sells fresh dates at farmers' markets. "They usually like them, but they're an acquired taste."

While the astringency can be satisfying to Middle Eastern palates, Rawia Bishara, a native of Nazareth who owns the restaurant Tanoreen in Brooklyn, sweetens fresh dates. She pits them, fills them with

almonds and steeps them in a rosewater bath. (Most stores that sell the dates will have the ingredients.)

In the Arabic nomenclature used by date farmers in the United States, these dates are "khalal," the second of four main stages of datehood. They come after the green "kimri" stage and just before the soft, gooey "rutab" stage. Almost all the dates sold here are in the final stage, called "tamar," when they are firm and dark. Over the past few years, more markets have been carrying khalal dates.

"When we first got them, people would say, 'What are these things?'" said Charlie Sahadi, the owner of Sahadi's, a Middle Eastern market in Brooklyn. "Now it's no longer an ethnic item. It's a mainstream item."

Sweetened by the Sun

Fresh dates should be available in New York within days. Sources include the following:

Kalustyan's, 123 Lexington Avenue (28th Street), (212)685-3451.

Ninth Avenue International, 543 Ninth Avenue (40th Street), Clinton, (212)279-1000.

Sahadi's, 187 Atlantic Avenue (Court Street), Brooklyn, (718)624-4550.

Until Friday, they can be ordered from Oasis Date Gardens, Thermal, Calif., at (800)827-8017, \$25.50 for 10 pounds plus shipping.

For the next month, they will be available from the Jewel Date Company in Thermal, (760)399-4474, for \$4 per pound plus shipping; and Tadros Tadros, Palm Desert, Calif., (760)564-3387. Call for price.

FRESH DATES WITH ALMONDS

Adapted from Rawia Bishara of Tanoreen

Time: 45 minutes plus overnight chilling

32 fresh khalal dates

32 raw almonds

1/2 cup sugar

1/4 cup fresh orange juice

1 tablespoons orange blossom water

1 tablespoon rosewater

5 whole cloves

1 cinnamon stick

2 drops lemon juice

1 cup ricotta cheese.

1. Trim dry stem end of dates, and pit with an olive pitter. Stuff each with an almond.
2. Put 1 cup water in a saucepan and bring to simmer. Add sugar while stirring until dissolved. Add orange juice, orange blossom water, rosewater, cloves and cinnamon sticks. Bring to boil. Add lemon juice.
3. Turn heat down and simmer for 10 minutes. Drop in dates one at a time, being careful not to let almonds fall out. Simmer for 12 minutes. Turn off heat and let cool uncovered until dates reach room temperature. Refrigerate in syrup until chilled.
4. Divide dates among four plates and serve with a scoop of ricotta and a bit of syrup.

Yield: 4 servings.

Photo: NO MELLOWING NEEDED -- Barhi dates are the only variety sold fresh in the United States. (Photo by Tony Cenicola/The New York Times)