

Breaking Into the Mainstream With Cactus Pears: Improved Varieties, Marketing, and Pitahaya

David Karp Food Writer

IMPROVED VARIETIES

For many years cactus pears have remained a niche item in American produce stores and supermarkets, sought after by some Italian and Hispanic shoppers, but ignored by most consumers. The key to breaking into the mainstream and selling more cactus pears is producing better-tasting fruit, and informing consumers that it's available. The truth is, most commercial cactus pears sold in the United States taste bland, but more flavorful cultivars do exist around the world, and there are vast differences between the best and mediocre specimens. Several domestic efforts to breed improved varieties are underway.

The ideal cactus pear should have an intense, complex, interesting flavor; not just sweet, but with a tinge of balancing acidity, and a lingering aftertaste. For commercial fresh-fruit sales, it's also necessary to produce large, colorful fruits that are relatively seedless, or at least in which the seeds are not a major drawback. Obviously, commercial producers also need cultivars that are productive,

fast growing and early bearing, resistant to pests and diseases, and tolerant of climatic stresses; but all of these desirable characteristics are of little avail if the fruit doesn't taste good.

In addition to choosing superior varieties, growers should focus on the following factors to produce tasty fruit:

- **Growing area**—Find out which soil and climate factors are responsible for top flavor, and concentrate plantings in those areas of the United States that offer the most favorable growing environment. What range of heat units and rainfall lead to sweet, flavorful, attractive fruit?
- **Cultural practices**—Fertilization, irrigation (amount and timing), pruning, thinning, etc.
- **Ripeness at harvest**—Picking immature fruit is the key factor most responsible for the vast amount of mediocre product in American supermarkets. Clearly, growers need to make good delivery to distant markets, so some compromise between flavor and commercial considerations is unavoidable. But please, try to pick as ripe as possible.
- **Postharvest**—Alas, cactus pears arrive at distant markets and wait for weeks to be sold, stored in coolers under unfavorable conditions that lead to loss of flavor and texture. This factor is largely out of the grower's control, especially for small producers. But as the industry develops, it should at least try to educate marketing channels about proper storage, as the California Tree Fruit folks are now doing for peaches, nectarines, and plums.

A few suggestions for marketing and publicity Say you've put in a few acres of promising new varieties, and they're starting to bear. Where do you sell the fruit? In my opinion, growers should consider selling their first crops through three channels:

- **Specialty produce distributors**, such as Frieda's and Coosemans
- **Fancy food stores**, such as Dean & DeLuca, Balducci's, and Gourmet Garage in New York

- To the extent that geographical distances make it possible, try to sell direct to the public at farmers markets, such as those in the Los Angeles and Bay areas of California. The best of these markets, such as the ones at Santa Monica and Hollywood in the Los Angeles area, feature educated, affluent, adventurous consumers. Offer free samples. You can sell small quantities of unusual foods at rewarding prices, and experiment before venturing into wholesale channels.

Larger producers (more than 10 acres) might also consider using wrappers and fruit box art to promote a romantic image of cactus pears as exotic desert fruit: Think of a beautifully printed box label, depicting a prospector with a donkey, selling gorgeous "Golden Nugget" brand cactus pears; or "Treasure of the Sierra Madre" brand; or "Armadillo brand," for that matter. Wrappers are currently in use, but these could be much more colorful—no companies in the United States are currently set up to produce really attractive wrappers on an economic basis, but the largest printer of such sheets can be overcome. As mentioned above, F.lli Manganaro & C. of Catania, Sicily, can be contacted at f.lli.manganaro@mclink.it; cost runs to about \$1000 for 100,000 wrappers. Once you've started producing a superior product, and are starting to sell it commercially, how do you get publicity in magazines and newspapers? Here are a few ideas:

- A large grower/marketer, or a publicist retained by the Professional Association for Cactus Development, might undertake a campaign to send out press releases along with samples of really superior-tasting cactus pears to editors.
- Make sure the press release focuses on an interesting angle, ideally with news content, such as the availability of new varieties, and advances in quality, as well as recipes.
- Make top-quality photos, both color and black and white, available to the press.

PITAHAYA

Several growers in California have planted or are testing pitahaya, which are in many ways dream cactus pears: large, vividly colored, spectacular-looking, with a great name for marketing: Dragon Fruit. Both the name and the fruit are very child-friendly (at least, once mom cuts up the fruit and hands out slices). Two major problems hinder the pitahaya's prospects:

- Many pitahaya taste bland and boring, and the taste varies considerably among individual fruits.
- Pitahaya are difficult to grow and fruit. Pollination is an art in itself; insects and splitting can ruin a valuable crop in a few days.

The potential reward, however, is great. At fancy food stores in Europe, such as Harrods and Fauchon, "dragon fruit" fetch \$15 a pound. Of course, large-scale production could easily flood the market, but both short- and long-term prospects for pitahaya production in the United States are bright, if the obstacles mentioned above can be overcome.