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A Luscious Taste and Aroma From India Arrives at Last

By DAVID KARP
Published: May 2, 2007

THE first legal shipment of Indian mangoes to the United States in decades landed at Kennedy Airport last Friday, probably the most eagerly anticipated fruit delivery ever.

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Steve Legato for The New York Times
LEGAL IMMIGRANTS The mangoes from India are prized for their intense flavor.

“If we can get them at good ripeness,” said Suvir Saran, executive chef of the Indian restaurant Dévi in Manhattan, “people will go mad for the beautiful, supple flesh and intense flavor.”

Some Indian-Americans have spent hundreds of dollars at an auction in Miami for rare Florida-grown Indian mango varieties; flown home specially for the season; or tried to smuggle illicit fruit past airport inspectors, striving to recapture rapturous memories of their homeland’s luscious, incomparable mangoes. Until now, though, most could only crave and dream.

Since India first applied to ship mangoes to the United States in 1989, the fruit has been barred because it can harbor the mango seed weevil, a pest absent from North America. A solution emerged in January 2006, when the Agriculture Department allowed the importation of produce treated with low doses of irradiation to kill or sterilize insects — a somewhat controversial issue.

On a visit to India five weeks later, President [George W. Bush](#) cheered the news as he announced a pact on nuclear energy and trade. “The United States is looking forward to eating Indian mangoes,” he said.

Indian newspapers covered each step of the process that followed as if it were the World Cup. A sequence of agreements, rulemaking and inspections led to the Agriculture Department’s certification of an irradiation facility last Thursday, the final approval needed for shipments to begin.

This facility, which has been used to keep onions from sprouting, is located 125 miles northeast of Mumbai (formerly Bombay), close to the prime coastal orchards growing Alphonso, India’s most celebrated mango variety. Harvested in April and May, this “king of mangoes” has orange-yellow skin, smooth, fiberless flesh, and a distinctive, powerful aroma and flavor, with notes of almond, coconut, vanilla and citrus.

Bhaskar Savani, whose family grows mangoes in Gujarat, and who owns a chain of dental clinics near Philadelphia, met with Indian and American authorities to speed the mango

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imports and brought in the first load. He provided most of this trial batch — 150 boxes of Alphonso and a saffron-skinned variety, Kesar, grown by his family — to the United States-India Business Council, a trade group, for its celebration yesterday afternoon in Washington. Commercial shipments will follow.

India has grown mangoes for thousands of years, and produces half of the world's crop, but inadequate infrastructure and pest quarantines have limited its exports to less than 1 percent of the global mango trade.

Besides hoping for lucrative sales to affluent expatriates, Indian mango growers are eager to export to the United States because they are proud of their country's signature fruit. The average farm is small, and most owners have not benefited from the boom in India's service sector. A United States Agency for International Development program is helping growers to improve agricultural and marketing practices.

The Indian exporters' optimism may be foiled by the brutal cost of flying mangoes halfway around the world. None of the major United States mango importers, who have close ties with their Latin American suppliers, seem interested in Indian sources. Now is peak season for Mexican mangoes, which provide 60 percent of the United States supply, and typically are inexpensive, 50 cents a pound wholesale — about a tenth what the Indian fruit might cost.

"I think the price is going to be an issue," said Erwan Landivinec of Baldor, a distributor to high-end markets in New York. Shipments could be less expensive by sea, but the fruit might not survive the 18-day journey.

Florida mango growers long ago imported trees or seeds of the best Indian varieties, including Alphonso, but these varieties don't grow well in the state's humid climate. The main Florida varieties originated from Indian stock, however, and imports of these fruits, which are now grown in Latin America, dominate the United States market. About five years ago Citrofrut, a large Mexican juice processor, planted Alphonso to add color and flavor to its mango purée. This experiment raises the possibility that moderately priced, unirradiated fresh Alphonso eventually might be available from Mexico. "We'd grab that in a second," said Bill Gerlach of Melissa's World Variety Produce, a national specialty wholesaler.

Some public health advocates oppose irradiation of produce, claiming that it causes harmful chemicals, but this use has not yet become as contentious as irradiation of meat, which applies a higher dose and serves a different purpose, to sterilize bacteria. The [Food and Drug Administration](#) and the [World Health Organization](#) endorse food irradiation as safe.

Dozens of studies have found that the effects of irradiation on mango quality vary markedly by dose, variety and ripeness at treatment. Overall, the process delays ripening, extends shelf life, and is gentler than the hot water dip used on most imported mangoes to kill pests.

Whether or not Indian mango imports succeed commercially, it seems likely that irradiation will soon become a common treatment for many tropical fruits.

Facilities in Hawaii and Florida that treat modest quantities of produce have been the primary irradiated sources for the United States so far, but a huge Mexican irradiation facility is expected to start operation in a year. Arved Deecke, general manager of Phytosan, the company building the plant, said irradiation will be cheaper than the hot water dip, and that he plans to treat a quarter of Mexican mango exports by 2012. Thailand likely will be sending irradiated fruit to the United States within a year, and several other countries have applied to do it or have inquired about it.

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Moreover, the Food and Drug Administration is proposing new rules that would no longer require irradiated foods to bear the international radura symbol, if they are not “materially changed” by irradiation.

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