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Saturday 11AM-2PM



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CHOW



Slow fruit

Hoshigaki: unlock the magic of persimmons

Beloved in eastern Asia—especially Japan—persimmons get little respect in the United States. Many Americans have never tasted the

by
Alastair
Bland

fruit. But Brock Dolman is an impassioned fan. Every fall he goes foraging for them, and the bounty is almost limitless in rural Sonoma County, where he lives.

“You can drive or ride your bike around the county, and you see these enormous trees all over with just thousands and thousands of persimmons,” says Dolman, the co-founder of a permaculture center and demonstration farm in the town of Occidental.

There are lots of ways to eat and prepare this fruit. Many varieties, including the fuyu and suruga, are crunchy and can be eaten right off the tree like apples. Others, including the hachiya, saiyo and chocolate, are considered astringent varieties. Rich in tannins, they are unpalatable until they’re allowed to ripen to a jelly-soft texture, at which point they can be eaten out of hand or used in baking.

Several years ago, Dolman learned of a new way to prepare persimmons—a Japanese style called hoshigaki. A revered delicacy in its homeland, hoshigaki is now starting to catch on in America.

In Japanese, hoshigaki means simply “dried persimmon,” yet describes a product of such labor that it has been called the Kobe

beef of fruits. To make hoshigaki, producers use twine to suspend peeled persimmons—always of astringent varieties—from bamboo racks, often outdoors in the sun, other times indoors near a fan or over a warm stove. The process can take between one and two months, and every few days caretakers give regular massages to the softening persimmons, which shrivel, turn dark brown and crust over with natural sugar.

Dolman says he learned the craft both from speaking to those with firsthand experience and by watching YouTube tutorials. He has gotten the hang of the technique and recently massaged his fourth hoshigaki crop—harvested from a tree in a nearby park—toward completion. He has just a handful left of his 2017 vintage.

“I share them only with select friends who will really appreciate them,” he says, adding that he often serves them with aged sheep or goat cheese.

Sonoko Sakai, a Los Angeles-based food author, spent years of her childhood in Japan, and is today one of California’s hoshigaki gurus. Sakai’s family was friendly with a major commercial hoshigaki producer in the Japanese city of Ogaki.

“They would send us a box each year as a gift, and there were seven of us and just eight hoshigaki in the box, so they were very special,” Sakai says. The family served the fruits with tea or, sometimes, sliced them thinly and applied them as a garnish

over kakinamasu—a daikon and persimmon pickle dish.

Hanging, massaging and drying persimmons could be seen as the antithesis to what so much of Western culture now demands and expects—instantaneous gratification, ordered digitally with the push of a button.

“Hoshigaki is the epitome of slow food,” Dolman says.

For newbies making their first hoshigaki batch, failure rates can be high. Mold can be an issue if the humidity is too high or the temperature is too low. For instance, I tried my own hand at making hoshigaki this fall. I used bamboo shoots to make a rack and twine to hang the persimmons. Though my project had the look of authenticity, the persimmons did not dry rapidly enough, and as a moldy fuzz began to appear on the fruits, I rescued them from spoilage and finished them in my dehydrator.

But when everything works as planned, each fruit’s surface turns gummy and solid, while inside the tannins break down and the fruit softens into pulp. Finished hoshigaki are dark burgundy to black in color, often with a fluffy crust of sugar on the surface.

“You’re turning a fruit that’s totally inedible when it’s not ripe into a sweet jewel,” says Sakai, whose forthcoming book, *Japanese Home Cooking*, will include a section on hoshigaki.

Maybe that will turn more Americans onto this unusual fruit.