

What's that weird fruit?

With its angry orange rind and spiky surface, the horned melon may be the Ugly Betty of the fruit world. But growing numbers of Americans are learning that beauty (or, more accurately, the lack thereof) is often only skin deep.

Tropical fruits with names often as weird as they look. Acai, cupuacu, rambutan, feijoa, Chinese wolfberries and the aforementioned horned melon (a.k.a. kiwano) have been used in high-end restaurants for some time. New is the growing acceptance of these fruits and their juices by home cooks seeking healthful new flavors.

Take rambutan. The visibility of this small white Asian fruit encased in a hairy-looking rind has jumped dramatically. The Perishables Group, a Chicago-based independent consulting firm specializing in produce, said rambutan's dollar sales jumped to \$67,388 in 2006 from \$16,214 in 2004.

As for the horned melon, native to southern and central Africa, sales have risen to \$743,022 in 2006 from \$570,061 in 2004, the group reports.

--Bill Daley

Name that squash!

Varieties such as turban, curry pumpkins, sibley, kabocha, delicata, buttercup and warted hubbard are making headway in squashing the notion that the heirloom vegetable revival is all about tomatoes. You'll see more unusual types coming to your supermarket this year.

Amy Goldman describes these heirloom squash varieties as "treasures from the past, handed down," in "The Compleat Squash, A Passionate Grower's Guide to Pumpkins, Squashes and Gourds."

"They're beautiful, delicious . . . eating them offers health benefits," said Diane Ott Whealy, co-founder and associate director of Seed Savers Exchange in Iowa. "People are paying attention to squash varieties and excited about widening their knowledge."

Most of the heirlooms, such as the ugly, bumpy hubbard, are winter squash, so-named because their hard skin preserves them through the cold-weather season. "I've read old stories about hubbards so hard, people learned to open them by dropping them out of second-story windows onto pavement," Whealy said.

--Donna Pierce

Noshing 'round the world

Exotic-flavored snacks line up to be 2007's most-invited guests. It has gone way beyond lime and chili Fritos.

Boulder's Thai chips, Kettle's roasted red pepper with goat cheese chips, Baji's Indian papadums, Funyun's wasabi "onion-flavored rings," even Terra's aioli "frites"--the world has gotten small enough to fit into your mouth.

Even the chips themselves have changed: Cassava, plantain, yucca, sweet potato and boniata chips have hopped over to the main snack aisle from the ethnic shelves.

Terroir, a French word, refers to all of the environmental factors that produce a wine or coffee (including but not limited to soil, air and altitude). Unlike chocolates that are made with a blend of cacao beans from many sources, "single-origin" chocolates are made exclusively from the cacao beans of one country, region or estate. In addition to the geography lesson, consumers are finding a cachet in nibbling chocolate from, say, Ecuador or Madagascar or Venezuela. Though single-origin chocolates aren't new, familiar companies such as Lindt, E. Guittard, Chocolove and Valhrona are introducing lines into mainstream shops.

"Consumers are getting more sophisticated," said Thomas Linemayr, president and chief executive officer of Lindt. "It's similar to what's happening in the wine industry and the coffee industry. We see the same thing with cocoa beans."

--Renee Enna

Look for a 'locavore' near you

Members of a group in California call themselves "locavores" because they eat only foods grown within 100 miles of their San Francisco epicenter. Across the country, people are pledging to follow the "100-mile diet," promising to eat only foods grown nearby.

The locavores' guidelines: If not local, then organic; if not organic, then family farmed; if not family farmed, then local business; if not local business, then terroir. The idea is that the average 1,500 miles a food travels to get to your plate is a waste of energy and resources, and doesn't protect farmland where you live.

Think your own 100-mile diet would be dull as dirt? Bet you're wrong. Visit locavores.com and 100milediet.org to find out.

--Robin Mather Jenkins

Fame on the farm

Chefs were the rock stars of the '80s and '90s, as Americans rushed to the table. Then rock stars (such as Dave Matthews in Virginia) became the new farmers. Now farmers are the new rock stars.

We're learning to appreciate the labor of those who grow our food, longing for a more intimate connection with the natural world. Even rock-star chefs are saluting farmers on their restaurant menus.

This year, get to know the farmers who feed you (such as John Peterson of Angelic Organics, above) by joining a community-supported agriculture venture or patronizing a farmers market.

--Robin Mather Jenkins

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