

Hurray for the Orange, Red and Gold

The Season for Persimmons

by Janice Cook Knight

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NELL CAMPBELL

In summer, persimmon trees are in disguise, shrouded in shiny green leaves, their dull green fruits nearly hidden. Then October comes, and persimmons take you by surprise.

What is that tree, you wonder, with the bright gold and red leaves? Bright trees are not a dime a dozen on the Central Coast. It only gets better: After the leaves drop in November and December, the persimmons reveal sculpted bare limbs hung with pumpkin-colored globes. Persimmons know how to say *autumn*.

My family grew two varieties of persimmon trees in our San Fernando Valley backyard: a Hachiya, which produces large, oblong fruit that must be eaten when very soft (or else the fruit tastes terribly astringent), and the Fuyu, whose fruit is mildly sweet and can be eaten while crisp. The trees enjoy our climate, are easy to grow and, besides their natural beauty in the landscape, their fruit provides ambrosial culinary opportunities.

Persimmons grow well all over our state. I think of them as Californian, even though they are native to China, and have been grown for over a thousand years in Japan. Most of the named varieties of persimmon are Japanese. Besides Fuyu and



Hachiya, some other varieties are: Maru; Tsuru no ko and Nishimura Wase (“chocolate” persimmons with brown flesh); and Jiro and Goshu, similar to Fuyu, though Goshu is much larger. All of these persimmons are members of the species *Diospyros kaki* (diospyros is Greek for “divine fruit”), in the ebony family, known for their dark, hard wood.

Most of the “chocolate” varieties must be pollinated to develop a light-brown inner flesh and can be eaten while still crisp. I have a beautiful small Maru tree in my garden. I planted it thinking the fruit could be eaten while crisp, like a Fuyu, and that is sometimes true—but for that to happen the fruit must have been pollinated while it was flowering.

It’s nearly impossible to tell if it’s been pollinated until the fruit is cut open—the pollinated fruit will have seeds, and the flesh has streaks of chocolate-brown. Then the

fruit is sweet and delicious. If the fruit has not been pollinated, however, the inner flesh will still be orange, and so astringent as to be inedible. In that case it’s better to have waited until the fruit was dead ripe and soft.

We just added a beehive to our garden to facilitate better



Peeling the Hachiya persimmons in preparation for making hoshigaki.

pollination, and I am going to add another variety of persimmon tree, the Tsuru no ko, which will also help with pollination.

There are hundreds of species of persimmon in the world, and there is such a thing as an American persimmon, *Diospyros virginiana*. It lives on the East Coast, from Florida up into the Great Lakes, and makes a lovely large tree; the fruits, however are very small, and astringent unless ripe, but said to be incredibly sweet when they are soft. There are persimmons in Mexico and persimmons in central Texas (persimmons that turn black when ripe, and will turn your teeth black when you eat them) and there are persimmons native to India and the Philippines.

But to keep life simple, Hachiya and Fuyu are the most common varieties found at our grocery stores and farmers markets. Their relatively large fruit size, pure sweetness and vibrant color has made them a worldwide favorite, to be cultivated wherever climate permits.

Persimmons have also managed to remain a seasonal fruit. With so many foods imported from around the world at all times of the year (grapes in February, for example), persimmons are still at the markets only when they are ripe in North America: October, November and into December. Perhaps it is their color that determines this: They do look an awful lot like pumpkins, another strictly seasonal food.



I had to learn to love eating persimmons. I thought the Hachiyas were rather gushy when I was young. When fully ripe they are gelatinous and sweet—some people think they are too sweet. Hachiyas are often made into puddings, cakes and cookies. I enjoy them this way, but their flavor gets hidden when combined with flour, spices and other ingredients. Now I love the fruit plain, or mixed into yogurt.

The fruit can be frozen whole, unpeeled, the top sliced off and then eaten like a sorbet, or the fruit can be churned into sorbet or ice cream. The ripe fruit can be cut into chunks, frozen on trays and stored in bags or freezer boxes; the frozen chunks make delicious smoothies or milkshakes.

Perhaps my favorite way to eat Hachiya persimmons is dried: In Japan, China, Korea and Vietnam, Hachiya persimmons are dried whole, making a delectable new year's treat known in Japan as *hoshigaki*, which means "dried persimmon." I have been making these for several years and I look forward to it every fall.

Fully orange but not yet soft Hachiya persimmons are carefully peeled in October or early November, left whole and hung on strings over bamboo poles. After four or five days, you gently massage the fruit, once every few days, as they dry. They soften as they ripen, but because they've been peeled, an outer "skin" forms that keeps the soft part from breaking through, if you massage gently. After a few weeks the persimmons will be massaged into a somewhat flattened state, and a sugary coating will form on the outside. In Japan, this



After the strings are tied to the stems, the persimmons are hung to slowly dry.

coating is sometimes scraped off and put into tiny bottles and given to newlyweds—so they will have a sweet life together. (Persimmons are also romantic.)

Last year I tried another drying method for the Hachiyas. I was out of town for a couple of weeks at the beginning of the massage period, and had read in *Sunset* magazine that persimmons could be hung to dry without massaging at all. My persimmons therefore received very little massage in 2013. And do you know what? They dried beautifully, and nearly a year later, they are still succulent and sweet. They are more round than flat, though they did not develop their usual sugary coating. Massaging them brings the sugar to the surface. But, the sugar is still inside the persimmons.



ERIN FEINBLATT

The finished hoshigaki have a dry sugary coating.

To make hoshigaki you need good fruit. I get mine from my friend and neighbor Shirley Roby. Shirley's persimmon tree is estimated to be over 70 years old. It's a towering beauty nearly 30 feet tall, located on the Riviera. Every year it seems to be loaded with fat, juicy persimmons (although in drought years, like last year, the fruit is smaller).

Shirley's family used to be in the persimmon business. Years ago Santa Barbara was much more agricultural than now, and Shirley's grandfather A.J. Haverland had a fruit ranch in Goleta: 40 acres at Cathedral Oaks and old San Marcos Road. Her grandfather grew walnuts, lemons, avocados, oranges—and persimmons. About 30 large trees yielded plump Hachiyas each autumn.

Shirley recalls helping her mother pack the fruits carefully in sheets of waxed paper, which was placed in boxes filled with shredded paper to protect the persimmons while traveling. The family picked and packed on the weekends, so that on Monday the fruit could be shipped by express train to customers in the East and Midwest, where the large, desirable fruits were a rare treat.

In late October I go to Shirley's house and we pick persimmons using a long-pole picker with a cloth basket. We lay them carefully in baskets, then sit outdoors, where we cut the persimmons from the still-attached wood, leaving a stem long enough to tie a string around. We then peel the persimmons, throwing the peels onto newspaper at our feet. After the fruit is peeled, we tie long strings onto the persimmons, one persimmon at each end of the string to make a counterbalance.

I take mine home, and then hang the persimmons over bamboo poles in my dining room, balanced across two chairs. The room is warm and sunny in the autumn and the weather's usually dry, so it's a good environment for drying them. After a few days I begin the massaging process. (If the weather is foggy and damp, the hanging persimmons can become moldy, but only one year was this a problem.)

I love the Fuyu persimmons too, sliced crisp and eaten like an apple (great with cheese) and sliced or cubed and tossed into salads with fresh greens. Fuyu persimmons can also be dried, by slicing, then dehydrating them. Their texture is different than hoshigaki: more like fruit leather. Several growers sell them at our farmers markets in late fall.

One year we hosted a holiday party, and without thinking I had left a plate of still-whole hoshigaki sitting out on the kitchen counter. There were several that had begun to fall off their strings, and rather than store them away, I thought a little further drying would be helpful so I left them near a sunny window. The guests thought they were an offering and helped themselves, eating the persimmons whole! That might not sound strange, but you've got to know that hoshigaki are extremely sweet. To serve them, you cut them into thin slivers, meant as an addition to a cheese plate perhaps. The sight of these few guests (there weren't enough for everyone to eat a whole one) eating the whole sweet thing was amazing, like watching someone eating spoonfuls of sugar. I didn't stop them, and by the end of the evening the plate was empty. It was a very happy party. [e](#)

Janice Cook Knight is the author of *Follow Your Heart's Vegetarian Soup Cookbook* and *The Follow Your Heart Cookbook: Recipes from the Vegetarian Restaurant*. She has taught cooking for over 25 years and currently teaches a cookbook-writing workshop. She lives in Santa Barbara with her family. JaniceCookKnight.com

Learn More

I learned to make hoshigaki from Jeff Rieger and Laurence Hauben of Penryn Orchards. They will be hosting a class in Santa Barbara sometime this fall, when the Hachiya persimmons are ready. Contact Laurence at info@marketforays.com. You can buy the succulent finished product from them if you don't want to make your own: PenrynOrchardSpecialties.com/Active/buyhoshigaki.html