
GROUND CHERRIES: FRUIT OR VEGETABLE?

BY CYNTHIA GRABER

I ducked into Mariposa Bakery in Cambridge's Central Square one summer afternoon for lunch. I ordered the farmers' market salad – what better way to celebrate August's bounty? – and sat down with a friend. When the salad arrived, I dug in without paying much attention to the riot of vegetables.

Suddenly an unusual flavor burst in my mouth: it started out tangy, savory, with a hint of tomato, then turned bright, sweet, and fruity, almost like a raspberry. I looked down, turned over a piece of arugula, and uncovered deep orange, berry-size orbs. I'd never seen anything like them. I picked one up and bit in. Then another, and another. I was hooked.

Mariposa Bakery calls them strawberry tomatoes, as do two vendors selling them at Cambridge farmers' markets. Most commonly, they're known as ground cherries. Other names include husk cherries, husk tomatoes, even the bizarre cape gooseberries (though this is a slightly different variety, and the 'cape' referenced is in South Africa, not Massachusetts).

Despite the confusing nicknames, ground cherries are most closely related to that tomato cousin, the green, husked tomatillo so popular in Mexican cooking. The tiny yellow or orange version is cloaked with a thin, brown husk that looks like a miniscule lantern.

Their peculiar combination of savory and intense sweetness can be, to many, simply irresistible. "People came up to me and said, 'Ground cherries, what are those?'" says Jennifer Hashley, who sells them at farmers' markets in Lexington and Arlington through the World Peas Collective. "Parents then try them, and they feed them to their kids, and they all become addicted. Mothers come back to the market and say their kids tell them they have to buy more," she adds.

Ground cherries are originally native to South and Central America, and Colombia still exports them, particularly to Europe. The fruit has been known in the US since the early 1800s, according to the Seed Saver Exchange, an organization that sells heirloom fruit and vegetable seeds and is dedicated to preserving heirloom species. The plants grow easily in a wide variety

of climates, and they're popular in rural areas of Pennsylvania, and in the eastern provinces of Canada. Here in New England, however, the fruity tomatillos had nearly disappeared.

Then, a few years ago, local farmers rediscovered them. Andy Pollock of Silverbrook Farm in Dartmouth, in southeastern Massachusetts, noticed them in the Seed Saver Exchange catalogue and thought they would be a marketable novelty item. Though a handful of farmers had begun growing them, Pollock found himself the sole garden cherry purveyor nearly everywhere he sold last summer. But, he learned, the tiny husked fruit triggered memories. "I talked to older women who shopped at the markets, and they remembered them – they'd remember making jelly from [garden cherries in] their family gardens. I think the fruit just had fallen out of favor," says Pollock.



This variety also attracts tomato converts. "Some shoppers assured me that they don't like tomatoes, but I told them to just give it a try," says Pollock. The tasting strategy worked. In fact, he says, "We created a little stir. In City Hall

Plaza someone came down and said, 'Oh, this is what they're buzzing about at the trial court.'"

My reaction could be a textbook case of conversion. Despite the fact that I worship at the altar of the perfect August tomato, I can only eat it toasted with bread, or doused with olive oil and salt and paired with cheese. Raw, unadorned tomatoes have always soured my tastebuds. Not these. A bag of the little husked beauties barely makes it home from the farmers' market.

Ana Sortun, chef of the Cambridge restaurant Oleana, has long been familiar with ground cherries from her travels throughout Europe. They're popular in France and Spain, she says, particularly as a garnish on deserts, with the chifon husks peeled open like petals. Her husband Chris Kurth grows them at Siena Farms in Sudbury. "I like to warm them in a pan with a little bit of olive oil until they just start to pop and then use them as stuffing with Serrano ham and squid. With the two together, it's a typical Spanish combination," says Sortun. She

Photograph: Carole Topalian

likens the taste to a combination of tomatoes and figs more than traditional berries, and the warm sweet flavor pairs well, she says, with savory.

On the internet, a quick general recipe search turns up many for ground cherry pie and ground cherry preserves. Hashley says her ground cherry pie, a Web recipe, is a hit at summer potlucks. But I think I'll try Sortun's suggestion and warm them in a pan with some olive oil and toss the tomato berries into a main dish. That is, if I don't finish the entire pint first.

WHERE TO BUY: Look for ground cherries, or strawberry tomatoes, at farmers' markets around Boston in August and September. Some farms will be selling them to downtown Whole Foods stores in season. The husks should be papery and brown, and the berries should be dry, not sticky, and bright yellow or deep orange. Green ones are unripe and have anecdotally led to upset stomachs. ❖

Cynthia Graber is an award-winning print and radio reporter based in Cambridge. She can be reached at cynthiagraber@mac.com.

Allandale Farm



Boston's last working farm

Farm Grown Produce Picked Daily

Speciality Vegetables

Over 20 Varieties of Tomatoes

Fresh Baked Pies & Breads

Cut Flowers

259 Allandale Road
Brookline, Ma 02467
617.524.1531
www.allandalefarm.com

Open Daily 10am - 6pm

GROUND CHERRY & YOGURT TART

Pastry Chef Danny Angelopolous
Henrietta's Table, Cambridge

- 1 lb pastry flour
- ½ lb butter, chilled and cut into small cubes
- ¼ oz sugar
- 3 oz water
- 1 tsp salt
- 8 oz Vermont made water buffalo yogurt
- 2 lbs ground cherries

Blend the flour with the butter until you have a sandy texture. (This may be done using a mixer, paddle or by hand by rubbing the mixture until it is broken down into pea sized pieces).

Combine the water, sugar and salt and whisk together until dissolved.

Add ¾ cup of the water mixture to the flour until the dough comes together. Add rest of the water to the bottom of the bowl and blend.

Chill dough for at least 2 hours.

With a little flour, roll out the dough to about 1/8" thick. Cut a circle, approximately 6" across using a knife or pastry cutter. Using a spatula spread on approximately 2 oz of the yogurt (leaving a 1 inch border of the pie dough uncovered). Using your hands, crimp up the edge of the pie shell to make a wall around the yogurt. On top of the yogurt place a good amount of the ground cherries. Sprinkle with a small amount of granulated sugar. Egg wash the sides of the tart shell.

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees and bake until the pie dough is golden brown.



ARLINGTON Farmers' Market

Market Street Parking Lot • Arlington Center
15-16-17-18-19 • 650 yrs • June 15th - October 22nd

<p>Bruce Farm, Lexington Corn and Tomatoes</p> <p>Chestnut Farms, Hingham Natural Grass-Fed Beef, Pork & Lamb</p> <p>Crystal Brook Farm, Stoughton Goat Cheese</p> <p>Diehl's Market Garden, Lawrence Squash, Vegetables & Fruits</p> <p>Globe Fish, Boston Fish Pier</p>	<p>Grateful Farm, Franklin Chamomile, Citrus & Herbs</p> <p>Crest Oak Farm, Berlin Organic Vegetables</p> <p>Kimball Fruit Farm, Pepperell Heirloom Tomatoes, Peaches & Apples</p> <p>Melissa's Flower Farm, Grafton Flowers & Jams</p> <p>Nickiewicz Orchard, Bolton Fruits, Citrus & Vegetables</p>	<p>Smith's Country Cheese, Braintree Cheeses & Eggs</p> <p>World Peas Cooperative, Danvers Asian & African Produce grown by immigrant farmers</p> <p>Baked Goods</p> <p>Danish Pastry House, Methuen</p> <p>Bob Sargent - Flora Restaurant, Arlington</p>
--	--	--