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NO LONGER FORBIDDEN
Once Smuggled Tejocote Now Available
The Fruit Used for Seasonal Latino Punch Gets Punched Up

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Once the most smuggled fruit from Mexico

Tejocote: No Longer Forbidden

When Mexican Americans begin celebrating the extended Christmas season on December 12, the feast day of Guadalupe, they will enjoy one big change from a few years ago: ample supplies of *tejocote*, a peculiar crabapple-like fruit that most people have never heard of but which is an indispensable ingredient in *ponche*, the hot fruit punch emblematic of the holidays. Once the most smuggled fruit on the Mexican border, *tejocote* is forbidden no more.
Cheap and abundant in the Mexican highlands, tejocote (pronounced te-ho-CO-te) cannot be imported to this country because it can harbor exotic insect pests that could devastate American agriculture. So devotees of authentic ponche have had to resort to frozen or jarred or even smuggled fruit; nationwide, tejocote was the fruit most seized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Smuggling, Interdiction and Trade Compliance program from 2002 to 2006, said Peyton Ferrier, an economist with the department’s Economic Research Service.

A decade ago, this dangerous and illicit trade was even more active. Luis Huerta, now a USDA smuggling control officer, said that in 1997 his team confiscated more than 9,000 pounds of fresh Mexican tejocotes at the produce district in downtown Los Angeles and other local markets. "Entomologists found lots of different pests in these fruits, many of which were gathered from the wild,” he added.

In a roundabout way, these seizures helped inspire the creation of a lucrative new industry, after a market vendor named Doña Maria asked Huerta how to obtain legal supplies, and he suggested that farmers grow tejocotes domestically. She passed this advice to Jaime Serrato, who was familiar with tejocotes from his childhood in Michoacán, which he left at age 10 when his family immigrated to California, where his father labored in orchards.

Over the years Serrato, now 54, became highly successful as a grove manager and exotic fruit grower in Pauma Valley, a lush San Diego County agricultural community north of Valley Center. In addition to farming 1,860 acres of citrus and avocados for other owners, on his own land he specialized in crops that were sought by Latino customers but that could not be imported legally, such as guavas, sweet limes and tejocotes.

Smuggled and backyard tejocote always sold for very high prices, typically $8 to $10 a pound retail, and it is unclear why no one else had seized the opportunity to grow it here. A century ago Francesco Franceschi, a renowned botanist and nurseryman, introduced tejocote to Santa Barbara; and Luther Burbank, the celebrated plant breeder, tried making crosses with the trees at his Gold Ridge Experiment Farm in Sebastopol, Calif. A tree bearing tasty yellowish-orange fruits still grows there.

Burbank wrote in 1914: "The Hawthorn in particular is an extremely valuable shrub, and gives very great promise of the production of improved varieties of fruit through selective breeding. … With the Hawthorn also I have made some interesting experiments, but there is fine opportunity for other workers in this field. Indeed, the work of developing this fruit has made only the barest beginnings.”

Occasionally backyard fruit growers, including CRFG cofounder Paul Thomson, grew tejocote. There was no commercial production in California, however, until Serrato obtained budwood from the garden of an employee’s relative in San Diego 10 years ago and started grafting trees in his orchard.

Serrato harvested his first small tejocote crop six years ago, and today has 35 acres of trees flourishing near his hilltop home. He has experienced only a few problems, and today his trees are highly productive, his main problems being sunburn and occasional strikes of fire blight. Some of the crop matures a month or more before the main seasonal demand, around Christmas, and he has sought advice from postharvest scientists to determine the storage conditions that will best preserve fruit quality.

Serrato sells his fruits through distributors to Latino chain stores such as Superior Grocers and Gonzalez Northgate Markets, and since prices remain high, he perhaps understates his success when he says simply, "It’s been a good thing for us.”

Tejocote is the common name for Crataegus mexicana and 14 other
Tejocote Ponche

RECIPE BY JOHN RIVERA SEDLAR WITH JULIAN COX, RIVERA RESTAURANT, DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES
(SERVES ABOUT 25 COCKTAILS)

Chef’s Note: I’ve always enjoyed this classic holiday “Ponche.” I like how it doesn’t have that cloying over-spiced sweet character of the usual holiday spice drinks. The tejocotes really add depth and character to the beverage.

And the drink took on new flavors once I consulted with Julian Cox, our mixologist, at Rivera. We collaborated to create something new, something very adult and very spirited. We even serve the coctel in a coup or martini glass, and we served it bracingly chilled.

We both love mezcal so it seemed the natural compadre, but our main goal was to retain the character of the traditional ponche and to let the tejocotes be the star!

If you can’t find fresh tejocotes, use the jarred ones from Guelaguetza - they’re good and not too sweet. http://www.theguelaguetza.com.

For the Ponche
1 pound, 4 ounces fresh tejocotes 3 pears, quartered
1 pound piloncillo 3 apples, quartered
12 prunes 10 tamarindo pods peeled of their outer shells
1 pound sugar cane 1 gallon water
1 pound canela (cinnamon sticks), broken up 12 dried hibiscus blossoms
1½ pound guavas

In a medium-size stock pot mix all the ingredients together and simmer over medium heat for about an hour. Strain but retain the tejocotes for the garnish. Cool and refrigerate for one night.

For the Garnish
1 tejocote per glass on a wooden or sugar cane skewer 1 tamarindo bean peeled of bark
1 thin slice of persimmons per glass

For the Coctel
2 ounces Ponche 2 dashes West Indian Orange Bitters, available at Barkeeper in Silverlake*
1 ounce Del Maguey Crema del Mezcal

Assembly: In a cocktail shaker mix the Ponche, the Mezcal and the Bitters. Add ice and shake vigorously. Strain into a cocktail glass. Garnish with the tejocote, the persimmons and the tamarindo bean. Note: If you want to pre-make a batch to serve in pitchers, just use 2 parts punch to 1 part Mezcal, but be sure to use stemmed coup or martini glasses. * Also available online at http://www.amazon.com/Fee-Brothers-Indian-Orange-Bitters/dp/B001CDTO88

Jaime Serrato with fresh tejocotes headed for cold storage. Serrato Farms, Pauma Valley, California.

TEJOCOTE

(from page 11)

species of Mexican hawthorns, native to the country’s highlands; the name is derived from the Nahuatl word “texocotl,” meaning stone fruit. In Guatemala, where the fruit also grows, it is called manzanilla, meaning little apple. Hawthorns, of which there are hundreds of species around the Northern Hemisphere, are pome fruits, cousin to apples and pears and closely related to medlars. In fact, one recent scientific paper (Lo et al., 2007) suggests, based on genetic and morphological analyses, that medlars should be included in the genus Crataegus.

Tejocote trees, which can grow 20 feet tall, are ornamental, with dense, shining leaves. The fruits of various kinds ripen from October to December in California, range from less than an inch to 2 inches in diameter, and vary from yellow-orange to red, often speckled with little black dots. Inside are three or more hard brown seeds. The flesh is mealy and not very tasty raw but has a sweet-tart apple-like flavor when cooked, and is rich in pectin, which contributes an appealing unctuousness to ponche. Fruits grown by CRFG member Patrick Schafer in Philo have a pronounced bubble gum aroma.

Tejocote has been economically and culturally important since pre-Hispanic times in its homelands, where it was commonly grown in gardens and gathered from the wild. In 2008 about 65 percent of Mexico’s production came from commercial orchards, on about 1,680 acres, predominantly in the state of Puebla, east of Mexico City, said Carlos A. Núñez-Colín, a Mexican fruit scientist; 30 percent came from backyards, and 5 percent from wild trees. Production averages 2.17 tons per acre, and the price is not particularly high, about 20 to 25 Mexican pesos per kilogram, which is less than a dollar a pound.

Serrato does not have a name for the large-fruited, thornless variety that he grows, but Núñez-Colín identified it from photographs as ‘Pecoso de Huejotzingo’ (“Freckled of Huejotzingo”), the most common variety in Puebla. As a result of the peculiar reproductive biology of Crataegus species, many of which cannot readily be bred, most tejocote varieties have originated as selections made from wild trees or spontaneous mutations from orchards. Mexican pomologists have selected and named five cultivars of varying seasons, colors, fruit sizes and
thorniness (Nieto-Ángel, 2008; Núñez-Colín and Sánchez-Vidáño, 2010), ‘Centenario,’ ‘Tempranero,’ ‘Elí,’ and two selections of ‘Pecoso de Huejotzingo,’ ‘Calpan Gold,’ and ‘Chapeado,’ but these are not yet available under those names from legal sources in the United States. A red-fruited type occasionally encountered at markets and nurseries here actually has more intense flavor than Pecoso de Huejotzingo, but the tree is very thorny and the fruit size quite small.

The brightly colored fruits are often used to adorn Day of the Dead altars. Peeled and preserved in heavy syrup with a bit of cinnamon, tejocote traditionally provided a taste of fruit through the winter months when no fresh fruit was available, said Rachel Laudan, a food historian who lives in Guanajuato.

Ponche, which plays a role even more significant than that of eggnog in Western cultures, is served throughout the coldest months, but particularly from the Day of Guadalupe to Epiphany, on Jan. 6. It is essential for posadas, the festive processions commemorating the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, which take place on the nine days before Christmas.

The three basic ingredients for ponche are tejocote (whole or quartered), guava and sugar cane, but tamarind, hibiscus flowers and miloconcillo (dark brown sugar) are also typical, and almost any available fruit, like apples or oranges, can be added to the pot; some spike the drink with rum or tequila.

Tejocotes are also used in Christmas piñatas; for making jams, jellies and fruit cheese; for candying, such as for toffee apples; for extracting commercial pectin; and even for weaving into necklaces. “You hang it around your neck and eat the fruit,” said Huerta, the USDA officer.

Chinese and European species of Crataegus have long been used for medicinal purposes, and tejocote fruits, roots and leaves have also been widely used in Mexican folk medicine to treat high blood pressure, kidney troubles, and respiratory problems. In recent years scientists have analyzed the chemical and pharmacological properties of tejocote, and found it to be high in polyphenolic compounds, similar to those found in Chinese and European species (Núñez-Colín et al., 2007).

Other growers have noted Serrato’s success with tejocote and have planted orchards of their own, on about 15 or 20 acres in total, he estimated. Serrato considered planting more trees himself but decided against it when he heard that Mexico had applied to the USDA to export tejocote to the United States, which, if allowed, would probably lower the price his fruit commands, as happened recently when irradiated Mexican guava was allowed into this country.

In fact, Mexico filed its request in February of last year, and USDA scientists will soon begin a study called a “pest risk assessment” for tejocote, after which they will decide whether and under what circumstances it can be imported fresh from Mexico, said Larry Hawkins, a spokesman for the department.

Meanwhile, commercial tejocote smuggling has declined in recent years, said Jessica Milteer, another USDA spokesperson. It seems that demand for this curious fruit, for so long as notoriously hard to find as it was essential for traditional holiday festivities, is being satisfied through legal channels. Given the danger to California fruit growers from exotic pests and diseases, that’s the best news of all.

**David Karp** writes a weekly column on produce, Market Watch, for the Los Angeles Times, as well as longer features. A shorter version of this article appeared in the Times on December 9, 2009.

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Tejocote, or Mexican hawthorn—smaller red form at left is sweeter than the orange form at right.