

Quintessentially Quince

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In a recent *Los Angeles Times* article, David Karp referred to quince as “so out, it’s in.” Once a popular pome, it’s not hard to understand why quince isn’t a fruit-basket staple like its cousins, the apple and the pear.

This lumpy, golden yellow fruit can be difficult to find in markets even when in season during the fall months. On the other hand, those with quince trees in their backyards might complain that it grows in such abundance that it’s tough to decide how to use it. This doesn’t take into account the unpleasantly astringent taste that raw quince has when you bite into it. Life must be tough for the quince, often considered too inconvenient to preserve but not delicious enough to eat as-is.

When ripe, quince flesh turns from green to golden yellow and its fuzzy covering (similar to a peach) rubs off, revealing smooth, waxy skin that has an intoxicating perfumey scent. Once cooked, the tart white flesh turns a rosy pink. Quince is truly paradoxical in nature - most fruit is ideal when fresh but quince needs a little bit of cooking time and sugar to highlight its tastiest qualities.

However off-putting quince may seem when you pluck it off a tree and take a bite, it’s a surprisingly versatile fruit. Given the increasing emphasis on slow, local food, it makes sense that quince is gaining notoriety on the west coast where the climate is ideal for quince trees to thrive. The fruit’s high pectin content makes it a prime candidate for jams, jellies and compotes. In fact, the word marmalade comes from the Portuguese “marmelada,” meaning quince preserves. Cooked quince may also accompany meat, cheese or ice cream. It can supplement fruit pies for texture and tartness, or can be poached and served with whipped cream.

Quince trees grow most prolifically in Western Asia and South America, although California has North America’s only commercial orchards. If you’re lucky enough to see quince at a market in Greater Victoria, it was most likely harvested in a resident’s backyard. Local organizations such as LifeCycles and the Island Chef’s Collaborative make excellent use of the fruit. Under the Fruit Tree Project Business Partnerships Program, LifeCycles volunteers pick quince from backyards. With the support of the Marina Restaurant and Truffles catering, LifeCycles also makes quince paste that can be found at local restaurants and delis, while the Island Chef’s Collaborative sells a delectable jelly at their summer market.

Visit the Slow Food Vancouver Island and Gulf Islands website for two great recipes: quince jelly and quince butter.

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