

CULTURE & ARTS

TRAVELING WITH JEWISH TASTE  
Etrog: A Botanic Love Story

By Carol Goodman Kaufman / Special to the BJV

Like hundreds of thousands of Jews around the globe, we buy a lulav and etrog every Sukkot. Because I like nothing more than a good experiment, I have several times planted the etrog’s seeds post-holiday with the hope of growing my own citron tree. Silly, really. After all, I live in New England, a place known for record-setting snowfall. Having an etrog here requires moving the tree out to the patio in late spring, then schlepping it back to the sunroom every fall before the cold weather can kill it.

Then there is the practical side of the fruit itself. Aside from having one to shake with a lulav and one to use as a sachet, what is one to do with a bushel of citrons? Although it certainly is not among the most widely used of fruits, it turns out that fans of this citrus have incorporated it into candy, jam, and even salad. My energetic rabbi, Aviva Fellman, makes a potent limoncello-like liqueur, cedrello. And an intrepid group of women from the Beth Israel Sisterhood once managed to prepare – and sell – etrog marmalade. It was a gooey, sickly-sweet concoction.



From Carol’s etrog tree...

onto the kitchen windowsill, where I could keep an eye on my charges. After about a week, the brown and shriveled plant began to revive. But strangely, neither of the plants was growing toward the sun, as is the habit of every other plant I’ve ever owned. They were growing toward each other, arching their tender, narrow stems in a manner suggesting that they were whispering in a secret language, reminiscent of twins who had once shared a crib.

Both trees were now healthy. They grew branches and have been repotted again and again. Like siblings, one began to grow taller, while the other was a bit more stout, and I pruned both several times to prevent their hitting the ceiling. They stood next to each other night and day, outdoors in summer, indoors in winter. And they continued to lean toward each other, no matter how many times I rotated them to face the sun.

Every season, the two produced lovely bunches of blossoms that emitted a heavenly scent reminiscent of my Israeli family’s citrus trees. Their perfume complemented the tangy fragrance of the leaves. But I still had no useable fruit. At one exhilarating point, a microscopic citron did appear on the tip of a branch. I was so excited that I visited it several times a day, kvelling and excitedly posting a photo on my Facebook page. Unfortunately, my helicopter parenting must have annoyed the tree, because one morning I found that the miniscule fruit had fallen – jumped? – off its branch.

Now, everything I had read about citron cultivation warned me not to expect anything for at least seven years. As if that alert weren’t enough, my Israeli exotic fruit-growing cousin Reuven told me that growing from seed would yield nothing important, and that if I wanted an etrog like its parent, I would need to graft. Yet I remained hopeful. And patient. My optimism remained strong that one day I would harvest the bright yellow fruit.

Alas, after twenty years, I gave up. I removed the two trees from the sunroom, cut them to the quick, and set them outside for the lawn guy to take away. Oddly, he only took one tree and never took the other.

So, I brought the remaining stump back into the house, with a stern warning: Produce or I will throw you out. Really.

The tree grew back and yet again produced flowers, but no fruits. Given its attachment to its sibling tree, I was surprised that it managed to grow at all. Perhaps it had completed its mourning period and was ready to live independently.

But another four years went by when suddenly this past year, I was surprised – nay, shocked – to find nine fruits. Orange, round, and the size of golf balls, these etrogim seemed to have nothing in common with the traditional citrus fruits we find in foam-lined boxes at Sukkot.

Just as Reuven had warned, these were nothing like the parent fruit. No matter, I was over the moon.

But what to do with them, now that I had them? They’re not edible on their own. I decided on two recipes. First, with the peels I made a very potent cedrello that brought back memories of sultry Mediterranean evenings. Then I made marmalade with the rest of the fruit. The nine tiny fruits only yielded half a cup, but it was delicious, probably because these

So, back to my experiment. Twenty-five years ago, on my third attempt at growing an etrog tree, I resolved to pay closer attention to the agricultural project, and we got two lovely trees. How they came to be is a tale of botanic love.

About two weeks after scooping the seeds from my etrog and carefully placing them in brand new potting soil, we noticed tiny green shoots popping out of the deep brown earth. Within a couple of months, we had three seedlings. After another few months, I threw out the runts of the litter and repotted the two heartiest plants. I placed them in opposite spots in the sunroom, about 12 feet apart. Within a week, one of the plants had begun to shrivel and turn brown, while the other was still green and healthy.

It was time for an intervention.

I brought them both



...and from the internets

fruits had not been treated with either pesticides or coated with wax. Once the experiment came to its successful conclusion, I cut the tree down again, thinking I was done. It had taken twenty-five years, but I had had success. Don’t you know it’s growing back. If it takes another twenty-five years, my grandkids can write the next story.



Cedrello

An etrog’s take on limoncello. L’chaim!

- INGREDIENTS:
- 5-to-6 citrons, thoroughly scrubbed and dried
  - 1 (750 ml) bottle 100-proof vodka
  - 2 cups superfine sugar (if you don’t have any, just zap some regular sugar in a food processor)
  - 2-1/2 cups water

- DIRECTIONS:
- Pour 1/2 the vodka into a large glass jar. With a vegetable peeler or grater, remove yellow peel only, avoiding the white pith.
- Add the lemon zest directly to the jar. Cover the jar and let sit at room temperature for a full month.
- After the first month:
- In a large saucepan, combine the sugar and water. Cook, stirring frequently, until sugar is dissolved. Cool syrup before adding it to the vodka. Add the remaining vodka. Allow to rest for another month.
- After the second month:
- Strain the mixture, discarding the lemon zest. Pour into bottles. Place bottles in the freezer until ready to serve.



**Carol Goodman Kaufman**, has just published her second mystery book, *Crak, Bam, Dead: Mah Jong Mayhem* (Next Chapter Press). The collection of cozy mystery short stories features food writer/ aspiring investigative reporter Kiki Coben and her Mah Jong group as they follow clues from a “Black Widow” murder at sea to a suspicious death at a senior home charity event. Armed with a curious mind and her formidable group of friends, Kiki is ready to prove that the only thing you need to catch a killer is persistence – and maybe just a little bit of luck. *Crak, Bam, Dead* is available in stores and online.