

Traveling with Jewish Taste

The Wintertime Treat That Helped Build Israel

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



I believe one of the best things about winter is the wide variety of citrus fruit available for us to enjoy. The vibrant oranges and yellows contrast so nicely with the drab grayness of the season, and can cheer even the sourest of souls. More important, I love biting into an orange segment, my teeth puncturing the sweet, juice-filled vesicles and releasing a heavenly scent that tickles my nose. If I'm not careful, I can launch an arch of spray whose droplets shimmer like prisms.

Back in the winter of 1959-60, my father traveled to Israel with the intention of scoping out potential kibbutz life for us. (It didn't work out. They told him he was "too old," so he came home and planted a garden.) Dad returned with dozens and dozens of slides showing various family members, historic landmarks, desert landscapes, and even a fledgling Israeli automobile assembly plant. (I don't think that last still exists.) But the photo that really spoke "Israel" to me was that of my cousin Shoshanah standing in front of an orange tree in her yard on the moshav, the vivid hue of the fruit bringing out the russet highlights of her hair.

When we brought our children for their first visit to Israel in 1990, son Avi wanted more than anything to get his hands on a Jaffa orange. Our wonderful guide Yossi hopped a fence to retrieve one for him but, unfortunately, we were there in late June – well past the harvesting season. The one orange he found was a ball of mush. Avi has since returned to Israel several times, and I assume he has found at least one orange.

The orange fruit is actually a berry covered by a thick rind. While its origins are in Southeast Asia, the orange is now grown in warm climates around the world. Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama first brought sweet oranges to the Mediterranean area in 1498 following his explorations in China. Arab farmers in the mid-19th century developed a new variety of the sweet and practically seedless orange based on a mutation of the Baladi orange.

The German Templers, operating under the name Sarona, were the first to market the fruit carrying the "Jaffa orange" label. The variety became so popular that exports skyrocketed from 200,000 to 38 million oranges between the years of 1845 and 1870.

Later arriving Zionist agriculturalists then perfected its development. According to the Hope Simpson Royal Commission Report of 1930, "The cultivation of the orange, introduced by the Arabs before the commencement of Jewish settlement, has developed to a very great extent in consequence of that settlement. There is no doubt that the pitch of perfection to which the technique of plantation and cultivation of the orange and grapefruit have been brought in Palestine is due to the scientific methods of the Jewish agriculturist."

The Jaffa orange for many years symbolized the new nation built by the New Jew: back-to-the-land, strong, independent and self-sufficient. The fragrance of orange blossoms and their fruit wafted through almost the entire length and breadth of



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Working the land in an orange grove



Crates of Jaffa oranges being ferried to a waiting freighter for export, circa 1930

the country from November through March. The Jaffa was so important to Israel that it even earned the Tel Aviv-Yafo metropolis the nickname "The Big Orange."

The Jaffa is grown in other Middle Eastern countries (and American grower H.S. Sanford even brought it to Florida in the 1880s), but it gets its name from the port south of modern Tel Aviv from which it was originally shipped. Its characteristic tough skin made it less vulnerable to bruising, therefore well suited for export.

The development of the steamship in the 19th century made quick delivery of fresh, unspoiled fruit to Europe a possibility.

Israel is still one of the largest providers of oranges and other citrus to the European Union, with more than half its annual crop sent there.

The country's success in this area has provided fodder to the BDS movement (boycott, divestment, and sanctions).

A tragic cousin of BDS took place in 1978 when the Jaffa orange had a leading role in a terrorist attack. A group calling itself the Arab Revolutionary Army Palestinian Commando injected fruit sent to the Netherlands with mercury, in an effort to sabotage Israel's economy. Four Dutch children fell ill and were hospitalized.

Agriculture in general, and in particular the citrus industry, have declined in importance to the Israeli economy, for two major reasons. First, water has become increasingly scarce due both to increasing population and extended drought. "Exporting water" in the form of citrus fruit became a self-defeating endeavor. Second, manufacturing and high technology have become integral to the Start-up Nation's economy, reducing the country's dependence on the whims of nature that affect agriculture.

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites and artifacts around the world. She invites readers to read her blog at carolgoodmankaufman.com and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.



Jaffa orange brand used by the German Templers

Orange Cake

Back in the early 1970s, I lived in Israel for a time, and a friend took it upon himself to teach this New Englander how to cut an orange properly: Two circles top and bottom, followed by five or six vertical cuts between the two disks. Pull the strips one at a time, and then divide the segments.

This cake, adapted from a recipe by Nigella Lawson, always gets raves when I serve it, and it doesn't require any peeling. Plus, it is perfect for gluten-free guests and for Passover!

You can replace the oranges with five clementines, if that is what you have in the house. It is amazingly simple to prepare and super delicious.

Ingredients:

2 large oranges to equal 1 lb.
6 eggs
1 c. plus 2 T. sugar

2 1/3 cups very finely ground blanched almonds or almond flour
1 heaping t. baking powder

Directions:

Put the oranges in a pot with cold water to cover, bring to the boil, and cook for 2 hours.

Drain and, when cool, cut each orange in fours, and remove the seeds.

Puree the skins, pith, and fruit in the processor.

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

Grease and line a 9-inch spring-form pan with parchment paper.

Beat the eggs. Add the sugar, almonds, and baking powder. Mix well, adding the pureed oranges.

Pour the cake mixture into the prepared pan and bake for 45 minutes, when a skewer will come out clean. You might have to cover the cake with foil after about 20 to 30 minutes to stop the top from over-browning.

Remove from the oven and leave to cool, in the pan on a rack.

When the cake has cooled, take it out of the pan and drizzle with melted semi-sweet chocolate.

Serves 8