

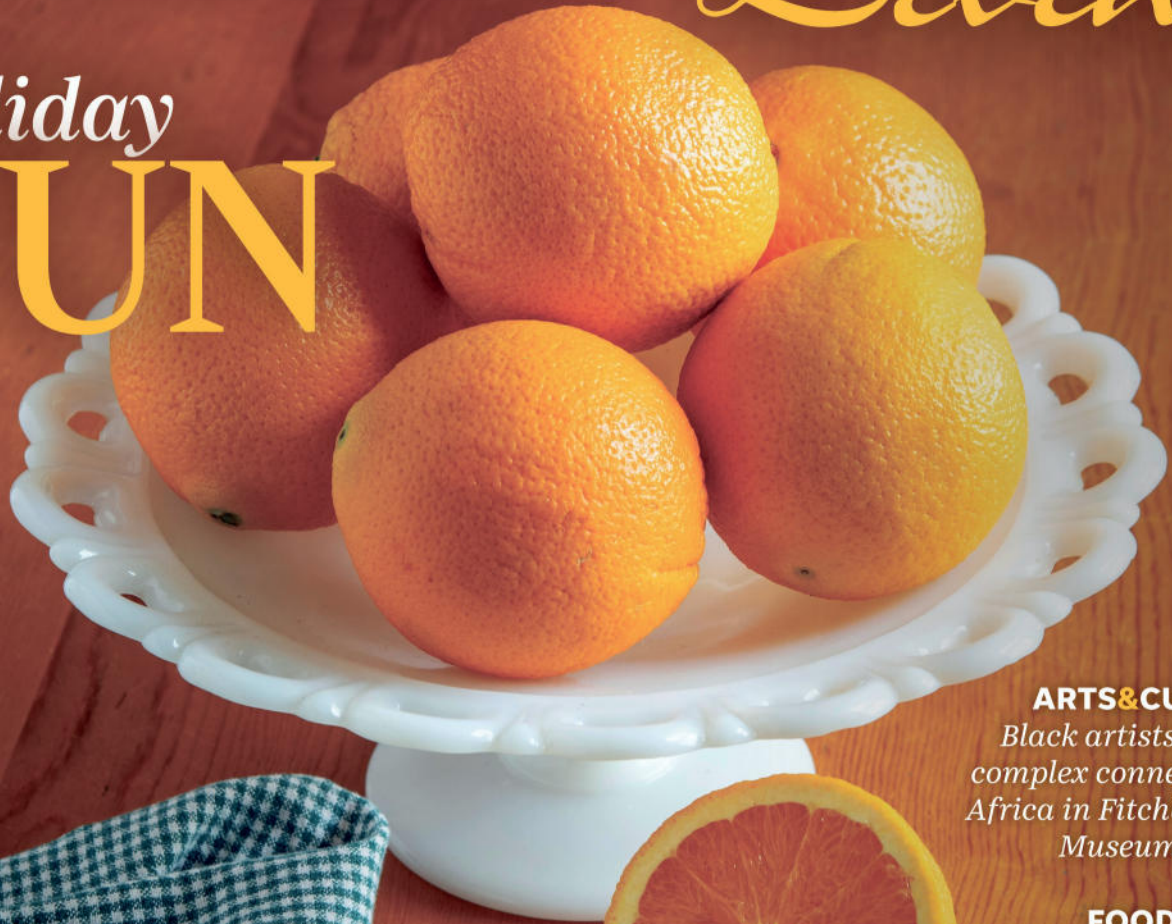
THE LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE OF CENTRAL MASS • WINTER 2023

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Reclaiming
oranges as a
holiday favorite

ORANGE *you glad?*

Story by Carol Goodman Kaufman | Photo by Rick Cinclair

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 that they can cheer even the Scrogiest of souls. Biting into an orange segment, teeth puncture the sweet, juice-filled vesicles and release a heavenly scent that tickles the nose. If you're not careful, you can launch an arch of spray whose droplets shimmer like prisms.

Of course, today we don't need to depend solely on California or Florida for our citrus, as one can get it throughout the year from places such as Brazil, Mexico and Chile. But back in the day, the golden orbs were a lot more difficult to obtain. In fact, even until the second half of the 20th century, finding any produce out of season was unusual.

Once a holiday favorite

In today's world, cellphones, notebooks and video game consoles appear on many a child's holiday wish list. But in the 19th century, for all but the wealthiest children, getting an orange in one's Christmas stocking was considered a treat. The fruits were not native to Northern Europe, so they were probably imported from Spain or Italy. Therefore, they were a rare and expen-

sive item and a prized gift.

Perhaps encouraged by Clement Clarke Moore's 1823 poem "A Visit From Saint Nicholas" (better known as "The Night Before Christmas"), the custom of hanging Christmas stockings became popular. The practice of placing an orange in the stocking continued well into the 20th century, both here and in Europe, and saw a resurgence during the Great Depression of the 1930s when many belts tightened.

But why an orange? One theory behind the tradition stems from the reputed generosity of the original St. Nicholas. Born in the third century in what is now Turkey, he was the son of a wealthy merchant. As the story goes, Nicholas learned of a father and his three daughters who had fallen on hard times. Wanting to help them anonymously, he tossed three bags of gold through the window of their house. Doing a Bob Cousy (this is, after all, Worcester), he landed them right in the stockings that the girls had hung to dry over the fire.

Oranges in Christmas stockings came to represent the bags of gold.

And St. Nicholas became known to the world as Santa Claus.

A rich, citrusy history

The orange fruit is actually a berry covered by a thick rind, but it didn't grow in the wild. The sweet orange we know today is actually a hybrid between a pomelo and a mandarin. Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama first brought sweet oranges to the Mediterranean area in 1498 following his explorations in China, where it is believed the fruit had its origin.

Although the first documentation of the sweet orange in Chinese literature

dates from 314 BCE, the Chinese have actually been cultivating the fruits since 2500 BCE. (Not to be outdone, India has been growing them for at least 7,000 years.)

Over the millennia, growers have developed many varieties of oranges. In the 10th century, the Moors introduced both the fruit and a sophisticated system of irrigation to the Iberian Peninsula, where the Seville and Valencia oranges became popular.

While the sweet orange didn't arrive in Italy until the late 15th or early 16th century, the bitter orange came to Sicily as early as the 9th century. It spread throughout Italy as evidenced by one of the most famous paintings in the world, Sandro Botticelli's "Primavera." Painted in the late 1400s, the work depicts a group of mythical figures frolicking in a grove of orange trees.

Although Florida has been suffering major losses since 1998 due to a disease known as citrus greening, the state remains one of the biggest producers of oranges in the U.S. today, along with California, Texas and Arizona.

By the 17th century, the sweet orange was well known throughout Europe. Wealthy people so valued it that they grew it in their own private conservatories, called orangeries. France's Louis XIV loved orange trees so much that he had built for himself the grandest of all royal orangeries at the Palace of Versailles. We here in Central Mass. have our own orangerie. The Marjorie Doyle Rockwell Orangerie at the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill in Boylston houses a large variety of subtropical plants, including citrus trees. I haven't seen any mythical figures frolicking there, however.

While Spanish explorers introduced the sweet orange to both North and South America and to Florida in the mid-1500s, it wasn't until the 1700s that Spanish missionaries then brought orange trees to Arizona and California, where they thrived in the sunny climate. ■

Moroccan Oranges with Cinnamon

This recipe will give you a light and refreshing dessert, especially nice after a heavy meal.

Ingredients:	2 tablespoon orange blossom water
2 navel oranges	2 teaspoons granulated sugar
2 blood oranges	½ teaspoon ground cinnamon, plus more for garnish
½ cup orange juice, preferably freshly squeezed	

Directions:

Peel the oranges and remove as much of the pith as possible.

Cut the peeled oranges into ¼ inch slices and add to a mixing bowl.

Add the other ingredients and gently toss the oranges.

Cover the bowl and place in the refrigerator to chill and macerate for several hours.

Arrange on dishes and sprinkle with cinnamon.

Serve cold.

Serves 8

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