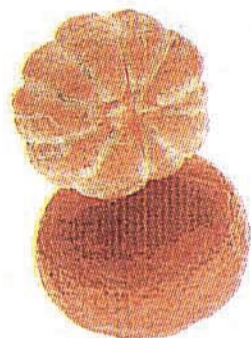


Sweet satsumas and darling clementines

TANGERINE SHOPPING LIST

Here are some tangerines (mandarins) to watch for, with a guide to when they're at their brightest, sweet-tart best. Most varieties are peaking later than usual this year.



Satsuma. A true mandarin, originally from China. Owari is the main variety grown. Flattish; small to big; seedless. Complex, sweet acidity, if picked ripe. Very easy to peel, although puffiness means they were picked too late and can taste flat. These appear in October, but peak in December and disappear in January or February. Extra-fancy versions are sold with stem and leaves.



W. Murcott. Deep orange, very sweet. Can be seedy, or not. The best start in February. Often marketed as the Delite.

Yosemite Gold. New variety few on market. Big; bright orange, seedless, easy to peel. Sweet and juicy. Best in February and March.

Kishu. Miniature mandarins with mild, sweet flavor. Juicy. Seedless. Easy-peeling. Very short season — it usually starts now, but this year not until January.

Page. A Clementine-Minneapolis tangelo cross, or tangor. Dark orange, round, intensely flavored. Harder to peel; quarter for easy eating. Great for juice. Mainly seedless, but not always. Peak starts now. A favorite of growers and produce sellers.



Fairchild. An early, old-fashioned Clementine-tangelo cross. Thin, dark orange, somewhat bumpy skin is hard to peel. Seedy. Juicy but flavor not as intense as satsumas. At their peak now.



Pixie. Late-season hybrid mandarin with sweet, rich flavor; very small and firm, pale orange, harder to peel skin. Season starts late January or early February; they hold well on trees so can stay good well into spring.

Dancy. Flat, large; very red-orange skin; easy to peel. Delicious, but seedy. Puffy if picked past peak.



Clementine. Extremely popular. Round, easy to peel, very sweet; can have seeds or not. Well-grown fruit can be excellent. Peaking now. Often marketed as Cuties.



Tango. New seedless W. Murcott, developed using irradiation. Expect to see lots in the next few years.

— Carol Ness

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describing his miniature kishu variety, which is about the size of a half-dollar and will flash through the market for a few short weeks in January:

"Start with the fact that they're cute. The peel falls off and what's revealed inside is like baby's toes — tiny segments and they're perfect and clean. They're the essence of tangerine, they're so good. And they're juicy, and they have this little burst of flavor . . ."

OK, Jim. Yes, he's selling his fruit, but that doesn't make him wrong. He could be describing any kind of tangerine sampled at its peak.

A bowl of pretty tangerines with fresh green stems and leaves can add holiday zest to a dining table or kitchen counter, and often serves as a symbol for gold among Chinese people celebrating the lunar New Year. Kids love them, because they're small, sweet and easy to peel.

Salad addition

As far as cooking goes, their main use is in winter salads, where they can provide a sweet burst of flavor amid bitter greens and nuts or nut oils. And segments arranged in circular rows can brighten up a custard tart. But mainly, tangerines are for eating.

One reason tangerines, or mandarins, don't get their due is that it's easy to take them for granted. The season stretches out from autumn's first satsumas until June.

The category can be plain confusing. Both tangerine and mandarin are used interchangeably to cover many different kinds of vaguely related fruits.

There are Page mandarins, clementines, Dancy and Fairchild tangerines, W. Murcotts and Pixies, to just name a few. Some are seedless, some aren't, and some can be either, depending on how they're grown. To further complicate things, they're marketed under brand names like Delites and Cuties, often in little 5-pound boxes.

The differences aren't just in the names. All mandarins share a tendency toward loose skins, small size and tangy sweetness, but the many varieties have distinctive flavors. Some are sweeter, some more acidic. The window for ripening on the tree is very narrow — picked too early, they'll be tart; too late and they'll be flat. Flavor also depends on how they're grown, how long they're stored and whether they're waxed or treated with chemicals to keep them from spoiling.

Short peak season

Mandarins are in the market for months, but the peak season for each variety is short. New varieties have been developed to stretch the season as far as possible, but growers admit that the early and late varieties often lack the flavor of fruit at its peak.

Sweet satsumas started in October — the Owari variety is widely considered the best — but didn't sparkle until around the end of November; California's best will be gone by mid-January. Clementines started tasting really good earlier this month.

Round, intensely flavored Page



Photos by JOHN LEE / Special to The Chronicle

Beauty is more than skin-deep with tangerines.

mandarins — a favorite of all the growers I spoke with — have been in for weeks now, but the best are just about to start.

Pixies come later, and then the W. Murcotts. (See "Tangerine shopping list" at left.)

How can you tell which are best when? "What you taste is what you get," says Bill Fujimoto, one of the Bay Area's best produce buyers and owner of the Monterey Market in Berkeley. "You can't tell by looking."

It helps to know the variety and how ripe the fruit was when picked, he says — but many stores don't tell you that. They can look beautiful even when they've been picked green, because exposure to ethylene gas brings up their bright orange color — but they won't be ripe.

Fujimoto's advice: "Buy one first, and taste it — then buy more. Especially the clementines."

Clementines are hot

Clementines are bouncy, round mandarins, slightly tarter than satsumas, which are all the rage. In the last 10 years, plantings have spread from almost no acres to about 25,000 acres, according to Ray Copeland, the Exeter (Tulare County) grower who brought the three most heavily planted varieties over from Morocco in the late 1980s.

Farmers in Spain, who grew the fruit and sold it all over Europe, found a hot market for clementines on the East Coast of the United States — but "we hadn't paid much attention here in California," Copeland says.

Now, dozens of varieties are being grown, and many more are in development at the University of California's Lindcove citrus research center in Tulare County.

Mandarins of all kinds accounted for almost half of the 160 new citrus varieties presented at the center's annual tasting last week-end.

One of the hottest varieties that is just starting to be planted is the Tango mandarin, a seedless version of the popular late-season W. Murcott. It was developed by a UC Riverside researcher using irradiation.

"People want seedless fruit," says Lance Walheim of California Citrus Specialties, a Tulare County grower and packer and one of the state's top authorities on citrus.

Seeds are a problem for many mandarins. Old-fashioned varieties like Dancy and Kinnow are as seedy as San Francisco's Sixth Street, and people avoid them in the same way.

Even mainly seedless kinds, like the clementines and Pages, will sprout seeds if they're accidentally pollinated by bees or by neighboring trees. In fact, there's a battle going near Fresno between beekeepers and clementine growers who want to move them out.

Big growers see big money in the Tango. "People are fighting over the budwood," Walheim says.

Some of Northern California's best mandarin growers, though, aren't going that route.

Flavor rules

Take Rich and Mila Johansen, whose grove in the Glenn County town of Orland, near Chico, is one of the northernmost in the state. From 45 acres of mandarins, all organic, they typically harvest 300 to 400 tons a year, mainly Owari satsumas, clementines and Page mandarins. They won't be planting the Tango, which doesn't fit their approach.

For the Johansens, it's all about flavor — not about hitting the market early or late, when prices are high. They pick only when their fruit is ripe and rush it to market, often the day after it's picked. A box of shiny-skinned Johansen satsumas, bought at Berkeley Bowl last week, burst with flavor.

"We don't wash, wax or hold it," says Rich Johansen. "We do not alter the color."

Johansen is excited about a few varieties he's trying out, including a Chinese import that goes by S9 for now.

"Down the road, look for the Jewel. That's our new satsuma," he says.

Another contender is the great-tasting Pixie, an older variety that wasn't sold much until Jim Churchill, in Ojai, started promoting it because he liked it. He says he discovered it when he visited a packer and tasted one from a bin.

"I asked him, 'Why don't you sell it?'" says Churchill. "He said, 'By the time I sell my Dancys, the kids have eaten all the Pixies.'" Hmmm, he thought — the kids like them, they're easy to peel . . . He planted a bunch in 1979, and now they're easy to find.

Kishus for Christmas

The kishu, irresistibly tiny, sweet and seedless, is Churchill's latest find — it was the favorite of grad students working among some 900 citrus varieties in UC Riverside's nursery. The kishu is usually a Christmas-time treat, but this year his crop won't be ripe until January.

When they land at Monterey Market in Berkeley, or in the hands of online specialty produce sellers like Melissa's, they disappear fast. But don't expect the kishu to hit the big time, Churchill says. Most growers won't go there.

"They're so little. And you have to clip them, you can't pull them," he says. "If you can imagine harvesting grapes one at a time with scissors — that's what it's like."

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