

# Celebrating a Citrus Revolution

## New varieties abound in the Bay Area market

By Janet Fletcher  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Now that golden beets and purple potatoes are practically supermarket staples, some California citrus growers are betting that cooks are ready for the next new thing.

Navel oranges still account for most of the state's citrus business, but in recent years a few specialty growers have been harvesting such rarities as sour oranges, Buddha's Hand citron, Cara Cara oranges, limequats, Lavender Gems and bergamot.

With a winter citrus palette that also includes Oroblanco and Melogold hybrid pomelos, blood oranges, Meyer lemons, Mexican and Rangpur limes and mandarin oranges, chefs and shoppers are enjoying a citrus revolution.

"I love having this citrus 'wardrobe,'" says Niloufer Ichaporla, an Indian-born culinary anthro-

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pologist in San Francisco. "I don't use them in a conscious way. I just grab and squeeze and try to have as many kinds as possible on hand at any one time."

Although many consumers are reluctant to move beyond the familiar winter navel oranges, grapefruit and Satsuma mandarins, curious cooks can now play around with a remarkable citrus parade.

Some are bone-jarringly tart (the limequat, the calamondin), some famously aromatic (the citron, the bergamot), some deliciously tart-sweet (the Page mandarin, the cocktail grapefruit). And, as usual, chefs are leading the way.

"I don't understand why people are afraid of these beautiful citrus," says Amayll Schwertner, chef at Stars in San Francisco. "Americans don't use nearly as much citrus in cooking as they could."

### Complementing Couscous

At Stars, Schwertner preserves limequats Moroccan-style in salt and spices, then uses them as a condiment for couscous. Tangerine zest perfumes her lamb and chestnut stew, yuzu (a lemon-like Japanese citrus) goes in tartar sauce and marinades.

She rolls Meyer lemons in salt to make a "lemon salt" seasoning and, at home, makes what she calls "the best vodka drink there ever was" with vodka and the juice of Oroblancos, a grapefruit-pomelo cross that tastes like a supersweet, low-acid grapefruit.

In Stars' pastry department, chef Sara Spearin uses a wide range of citrus in sorbets and compotes for diners who don't have much of a sweet tooth. She serves blood orange sorbet in candied slices of Buddha's Hand, the beguilingly perfumed fruit that resembles a weirdly distorted hand. The scalloped slices are stunning to look at, with a haunting taste somewhere between lemon and camphor. (In fact, citron peel, like camphor, is used in

some moth repellents.)

"I think there are real reasons why we crave citrus at this time of year," says Jennifer Cox, chef at Montage in San Francisco. Cox uses Cara Cara oranges, blood oranges, Meyer lemons and kumquats in salads and desserts, in part to balance the robust braised dishes that diners also seek out in winter.

"People need something to brighten up their palates because everything else is so low-toned," Cox says. "Citrus makes you feel like you're getting a little sunshine and vitamin C."

### A Quest for Diversity

One reason a greater variety of citrus is available today is that growers like Lance Walheim have branched out. Walheim, a horticulture writer for Sunset magazine, was researching a book on citrus years ago and visited the University of California's Lindcove Field Station near Fresno. This agricultural research facility maintains the "mother block" of virus-free, true-to-type citrus, the source of propagation material for the California citrus industry.

"I saw there were a lot of varieties that people weren't getting to eat," Walheim says. He began experimenting with the Lindcove fruit, taking some of it to the Oakville Grocery in Napa Valley to test consumer interest. Then he talked a few growers into planting some blood oranges and Oroblancos. When those sold well, he and partners Mike and Barbara Fokett bought their own groves south of Fresno.

Fifteen years later, the partners are growing some 30 different unusual citrus varieties on about 25 acres. Their company, California Citrus Specialties, also represents other growers and sells to brokers all over the world.

Specialty citrus offers a profitable niche for small-production growers like Walheim, who can't compete in the commodity world of navels and Valencias. Last year he picked 160,000 pounds of navels from trees he inherited when he bought his property. It made him \$700. Not surprisingly, he can do much better selling Meyer lemons to Napa Valley's Domaine Charbay for its flavored vodka, or to O, the flavored olive oil producer. Some of his specialty produce goes to Monterey Foods in Berkeley or to the San Francisco produce market, both conduits to the Bay Area's restaurant chefs.

Ironically, once growers like Walheim create a profitable market for a specialty crop, the larger growers want a piece of the business. Oroblancos are a cautionary example. Eager to get a high price by being the first in the market each season, growers were picking their Oroblancos underripe, Walheim says. Consumers were turned off by the green-tasting fruit, and the demand for Oroblancos dropped. The Japanese, who were avid customers, refused to take any more California Oroblancos. Acres of the fruit were ripped out.

### Quality Is Crucial

If there's a silver lining, it's that

the remaining growers are more quality-conscious, Walheim points out. They're bringing their fruit to market later, when the sugar-acid ratio is higher and the flavor better. But Walheim seems acutely aware that consumer trust is fragile, and that growers can easily ruin a market when they sacrifice taste for short-term profit.

Tasting Walheim's mandarin oranges straight from his trees reinforces the shortcomings of much supermarket citrus. His Pixie mandarins have a thickish, bumpy rind that's not particularly attractive in the marketplace, but underneath lies sweet, juicy, seedless fruit with a sharp burst of acid. The Page mandarins are even sweeter and more succulent.

"Once you try one, you never forget it," the grower says. "You can smell it a mile away when you cut it, and it has a richness and character that I think of as mandarin flavor."

Mandarin oranges are a primary focus of California citrus research, says Louis Whitendale, superintendent of the Lindcove station. Because profits are sagging in the navel orange industry, growers are looking for new varieties such as Clementine mandarins. They want easy-to-peel Clementines that size up nicely. They want early-, mid- and late-season varieties to extend their harvest season. And they want their Clementines seedless — a hybridizing challenge, Whitendale says.

### Abundant Choices

As a stroll through the fenced mother block at Lindcove shows, growers have no shortage of citrus choices. They can order budwood from 30 different mandarins, five different blood oranges, dozens of pomelos, grapefruits, tangelos and tangors. The mother block has sour oranges, Mexican limes, variegated pink lemons (no, they don't make pink lemonade), Kaffir lime, bergamot, calamondin, mandarinquats, and three kinds of citron. "There's a huge selection available," Whitendale says. "The question is, 'Is there enough market?'"

One of the market-makers in specialty citrus is Bill Fujimoto of Berkeley's Monterey Foods. His many chef-customers look to him to hear what's new and good.

"Everybody's planting Cara Cara," Fujimoto says. "That's what the farm advisers are talking up."

Cara Cara is an eye-catching pink-fleshed navel, a mutation that occurred naturally on a navel tree in Venezuela. Chefs have embraced it as readily as they flocked to golden beets, pairing it with blood oranges and ruby grapefruits in sorbet tris and winter salads.

Fujimoto also expects to see more fresh California Kaffir limes in the market because the leaves and peel are essential to Thai cooking. "Everybody says they've planted a tree," he says, but currently the steadiest supply comes from Florida.

In contrast, Meyer lemons have been so widely planted that the market may struggle to absorb

them. But not for long, Fujimoto predicts. "All you have to do is ship them to Kansas City and demo them and the market will take over. I would think any fish restaurant would love to have Meyer lemons."

Fujimoto is also looking forward to the University of California's new mandarin hybrids, which will show up over the next few years as newly planted trees begin bearing. In the meantime, he's shaking his head over the underwhelming reception for the Oroblanco, another university creation that achieved the hybridizers' holy grail: a sweet grapefruit.

"We've been selling them since the 1980s. They're wonderful, but consumers don't know what's inside. Navels and grapefruits are cheap, so it's hard to get people to jump in," he says. Those who do will find a deeply flavorful breakfast fruit that's more tart than an orange but sweeter than a conventional grapefruit, with few or no seeds.

### Pastry Chef's Passion

Lindsey Shere, former Chez Panisse pastry chef, was an early convert to Lavender Gems, Oroblancos, Clementines, Meyer lemons and other unusual citrus — most of which she discovered through Fujimoto. Her 1985 cookbook, "Chez Panisse Desserts," includes recipes for Lavender Gem sherbet, blood orange ice cream and Meyer lemon soufflé. She is still an enthusiast and a student. At the recent Slow Food conference in Italy, she found a Sicilian bergamot marmalade that she is attempting to recreate with bergamot grown at her Healdsburg home. Kumquats are another favorite.

"I love to eat them just straight," she says. "They have that sweet skin and sour flesh. At the restaurant, we did a lot of candied kumquats for candy plates. And they're so beautiful sliced and poached with other fruits in citrus compotes. I love kumquats. I have a little tree finally, and it makes me happy."

For citrus fans and cooks who welcome citrus in the kitchen, it's indeed time to rejoice.

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## Grow Your Own

Four Winds Growers in Fremont provides a large range of dwarf citrus to the nursery trade, and many local nurseries carry Four Winds citrus.

Don Dillon Jr., the grandson of the founder, says that Bay Area residents can succeed with many of the more unusual citrus, especially if they are grown in containers so they can be moved to protect them from frost.

Citrus need heat to develop sweetness, so kumquats, blood oranges, mandarin oranges, Cara Cara oranges and the pomelo hybrids do best in warmer inland areas. Most of these fruits are also relatively cold-tolerant.

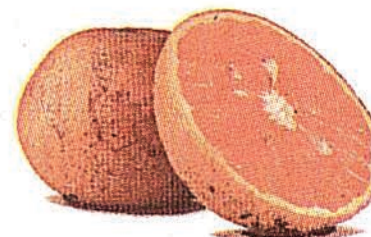
Frost-sensitive citrus such as limes and citron will need winter protection in inland areas.

Consult your local nursery for advice about appropriate citrus varieties for your area.

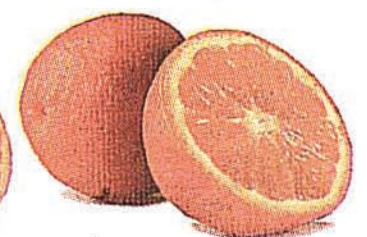
—J. F.

## MANDARIN ORANGES

The large and growing mandarin family includes the Page, Dancy, Honey, Satsuma, Fairchild and Clementine varieties. Mandarins generally have thin, easy-to-peel skin and separate easily into segments. They may be seedless or seedy. A ripe mandarin is fragrant, juicy and sweet with a hint of acidity. They are great choices for breakfast juice.



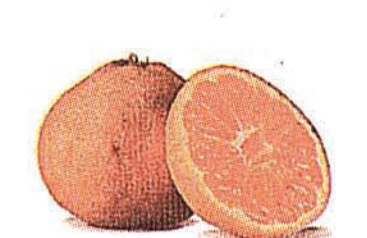
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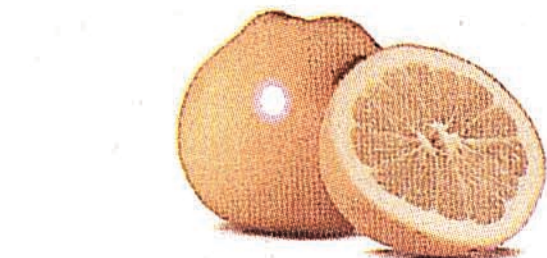
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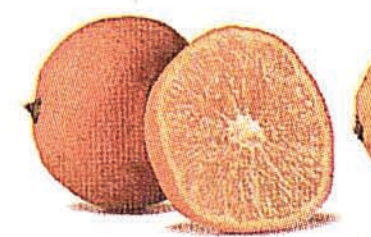


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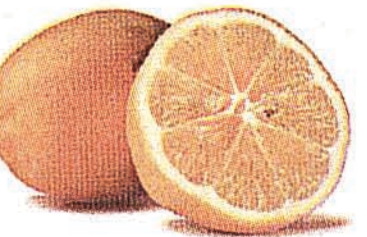
OROBLANCO

A University of California cross between a grapefruit and a pomelo, the Oroblanco is an exceptionally sweet, juicy and delicious fruit. Consumers tend to scorn it because it has less flesh and thicker rind than a grapefruit, but its flavor can be outstanding — sweet, with a touch of acid and no bitterness.



RANGPUR LIME

Resembling a mandarin orange, the reddish-orange Rangpur lime can surprise the unsuspecting taster. Even inside, it resembles a sweet mandarin, but its orange-colored juice is quite tart and tropical.



MEYER LEMON

Thought to have a lemon and either a mandarin or an orange as parents, the Meyer has a thin yellow-gold or yellow-orange rind and yellow flesh tinged with orange. It is sweeter, less tart and more fragrant than the common Eureka or Lisbon lemon.

### BERGAMOT

Possibly the offspring of a sour orange and sweet lime or lemon, bergamot resembles a large, rough-skinned lemon. The peel is highly aromatic and its oils are used in perfumes and Earl Grey tea.

### LAVENDER GEM

Also known as Wekiwa, the Lavender Gem is a grapefruit-tangelo cross. It resembles a small grapefruit, but the tangy, pink-blushed flesh is sweeter.

### CALAMONDIN

An acidic fruit that resembles a large kumquat, the Calamondin is popular among Filipino and Hawaiian cooks. Its parents are unknown. Calamondin trees bear fruit profusely and are highly ornamental.

### MELOGOLD

Developed by the University of California, the Melogold is a grapefruit-pomelo cross. Its rind is thicker than a grapefruit's but thinner than the Oroblanco's. It produces large, meaty, sweet and juicy segments with less tang than a grapefruit.

### KAFFIR LIME

The Kaffir, also spelled Kieffer, lime is valued in Southeast Asian cooking for its leaves and fragrant zest, both of which have a camphorlike scent. The fruit looks like a bumpy lime. The juice is sour and there's not much of it.

### TANGELO

A cross between a mandarin and grapefruit or pomelo. The Minneola is the most familiar tangelo, recognizable by its raised neck. They peel as easily as a mandarin, and have juicy, sweet-tart flesh. They may or may not have seeds.

### KUMQUAT

The kumquat has sweet orange skin and seedy, tart-sweet flesh. Unlike other citrus varieties, the fruit is eaten whole, skin and all. Some varieties are as small as a pea but the more common ones are about the size of a large olive. The most common varieties in California are the round Meiwa and the elongated Nagami.

### TANGERINE

A commercial name usually given to deeply colored mandarins such as the Dancy. It has no botanical meaning.

### TANGOR

Thought to be a mandarin crossed with an orange, the tangor is sweet-tart, rich in flavor and juicy, with many seeds. The Temple is probably the most widely available tangor in California. It's a good choice for juice.

—Janet Fletcher