



MAN'S OTHER



fruit

An increasingly common sight in our supermarkets, the world's total area given over to their cultivation is growing exponentially year on year, as is the number of Google entries and column inches devoted to them in the press. Catapulted to stardom thanks to their health-giving properties, pomegranates are the 21st century's latest must-have product. Yet our love affair with the pomegranate dates back a very long way indeed: some even believe that this was the forbidden fruit disobediently picked by Eve. We are off to the Alicante coast, famous as a tourist magnet and now also the epicenter of Europe's pomegranate production. Our mission is to look into the credentials of the world's sweetest pomegranate: Mollar de Elche, which is grown exclusively in the Spanish countryside.

TEXT

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TRANSLATION

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PHOTOS

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“The city of Elche can be recognized through the date palms that cover its entire district. (...) For a moment, one believes himself to be transported to the plains of Syria or to the shores of the Delta.” The words of the French traveler Alexandre de Laborde still apply even 200 years later. Despite the buildings that now inevitably punctuate its present-day landscape, this Mediterranean coastal town—a little powerhouse of world pomegranate production—still has a distinct look of Al-Andalus about it. Its *Palmeral* was declared a World Heritage Site in 2000: this area of formally laid-out date palm groves is an eloquent example of man’s battle against the elements to transform a hostile, arid environment into fertile land. The Islamic colonizers of the Iberian Peninsula brought with them their traditional mastery of the oasis principle: this amounted to a sustainable, revolutionary irrigation system for carrying out intensive horticulture. Rows of date palms helped create a benign microclimate, making it possible to grow fruit trees and other plants previously unknown in the Christian world. Among these was the pomegranate,

which soon became the sultan’s favorite. As Ibn Said, respected chronicler of the period, records: “Abd al Rahman I planted strange seeds brought to him from Syria by his ambassadors, which bore curious fruits. The monarch was delighted by the loveliness and beauty of the pomegranate and disseminated it the length and breadth of al-Andalus.” This Arab legacy found a second home on Spain’s east coast. Those early pomegranates adapted readily to the hot Mediterranean climate, saline soil and scant rainfall characteristic of this part of the world. While the genetic changes they have undergone through the centuries have not been precisely identified, the two varieties currently grown in the Spanish countryside, *Valenciana* and *Mollar de Elche*, are known to be exclusive to this area. Though they are grown all over the world nowadays, the history of pomegranates stretches back several millennia to western Asia. From Iran to northern India, pomegranates were cultivated by various civilizations, starting with the Egyptians—a picture of a pomegranate adorns the tomb of Rameses IV—and subsequently the

Phoenicians. Having become firmly established on the Iberian Peninsula under Arab domination, they crossed the Atlantic to the Americas on the ships of Spanish missionaries who disseminated them, along with their religion, in the state of California. It is a story of peaceful conquest whose final chapter has yet to be written. As we speak, different varieties of pomegranate are extending their domain on every continent. We tracked down the sweetest of the lot to the coastal area of eastern Spain known as *El Levante*.

Thousand-year old orchards

“These trees have been here forever! You have only to drop a seed on the ground and a pomegranate tree grows.” A wander around the area that lies between Elche and Albaterra, in the south of the Alicante province, is enough to reveal the truth behind this nugget of local folk wisdom. Fields of pomegranates and oranges stretch as far as the horizon in a flat expanse nevertheless endowed with a spectacularly dizzying skyline worthy of Manhattan, with majestic,





centuries-old palm trees interposed among the crops. We are in the Vinalpó Valley, an area of fertile open ground and orchards bounded by the calm waters of the Mediterranean to the east and the mountains of the Betic System to the north. This comarca is the source of most of the 25,000 tonnes (55 million lbs) of pomegranates that constitute Spain's qualification as Europe's only large-scale producer (it is beaten in the world ranking only by Iran, India and Pakistan). Furthermore, much of its production is destined for the international market, making the region a heavyweight exporter on a global scale. When the first truckloads of pomegranates to venture beyond local boundaries set off almost a century ago, they were headed for Barcelona and Madrid. Other destinations in the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Russia and Malaysia would soon be added to the list, building up to a current export quota that accounts for an impressive 80% of total production.

While other types of fruit would be lucky to survive such long journeys,

pomegranates arrive at each of their destinations in perfect condition. "They were one of the favorite fruits of nomadic people precisely because of their astonishing keeping capacity," we are informed by André Irlés, director of the Cambayas Cooperative, one of the biggest in the district. He also tells us that the secret lies in picking them off the tree at just the right time: "Not too early because, once picked, pomegranates halt the ripening process abruptly, and not too late because they are then at risk of splitting open." In calendar terms, the "right time" occurs in September-October in this part of the world. That said, the harvest is not a one-off affair. Pomegranate trees flower sequentially, creating the need for phased harvesting which is, by definition, manual and selective. Over a period of four weeks, the same tree can be picked two, three and even four times to ensure that each pomegranate is harvested at its optimal stage of ripeness.

"My father can judge by eye when to start the harvest," smiles Celia Mas as we stroll about her little plot

of land on the outskirts of Elche. Her holding is typical of the local plantation pattern: the overall view is made up of tiny plots—few over a ha (2.5 acres)—that have been handed down from father to son for generations. Having sold their produce to big local traders for decades, Celia decided to set up a business on her own account and today she sells her pomegranates and their juice—100% natural, as she is quick to point out—on the internet. Her policy of favoring quality over quantity has produced results: the products of her family firm, Campo de Elche, have been honorably mentioned by top chefs and are sold by some of the best fruit shops in Madrid—Frutas Vázquez, suppliers to the Spanish Royal Household. Although pomegranate trees reach peak productivity from their seventh year on and, in theory, start to decline after 40, her grove has trees that are centuries old and perfectly healthy, "thanks to my father's care and attention," says Celia proudly. Despite being over 70 and retired, not a day goes by without his



patrolling the plot. “He knows it like the back of his hand.” Sounds of lively activity from a nearby plot attract our attention. A group of day laborers has already started picking reddened Valenciana variety pomegranates. They tell me that of the two types grown in Spain, this is the first to ripen, flushing pink-to-red before the other. It is early September and the sun is still hot, but the team of workers—parents, children, cousins, friends—are, without exception, wearing long sleeves. “Whether it’s pelting with rain or blazing hot, this outfit is essential, otherwise, by the end of the day your arms are covered in scratches,” explains one of them, demonstrating the reason why. The pomegranate tree, variously categorized as a small tree or a tall shrub, conceals sharp thorns on the ends of its branches. Its thorny nature and deep red flowers (known as *jullanâr*, and often celebrated by Arab and Persian poets) are characteristics that it shares with the rose. The pomegranate blossom was replaced months ago by the fruits that now, in September, fill the

harvesters’ crates. This first picking of Valenciana pomegranates serves as a warm-up for another, later and perhaps more eagerly awaited harvest of the Mollar de Elche variety, unchallenged monarch of the Alicante countryside.

Deceptive appearances

Accustomed as he is to the flavor of the Mollar de Elche variety, Domingo Arce, director of the Albafruits Cooperative, the biggest in Albaterra, can barely contain his mirth when he recalls his first taste of a foreign pomegranate. “I thought it was a different fruit altogether! It was as sour as a lemon!” Comparisons may be odious, but there is no denying that, for sweetness, the pomegranates grown hereabouts stand out proudly from all the rest. Spanish-grown pomegranates have a characteristic caramel flavor that gives them a big advantage in an increasingly competitive market. But the high concentration of sugars is not Mollar de Elche’s only advantage:

it also has very small, soft, yielding pips that are barely discernible in the mouth so that this variety is very easy to eat.

As in the wine world, variety is just one factor in the fruit’s overall character. To borrow wine terminology, this part of Alicante is the equivalent of a *terroir* that stamps its indelible imprint on the Mollar de Elche pomegranate. Like vines, pomegranate trees survive in conditions that few other plants can tolerate. They cope well with drought and thrive in poor soils, to which they respond by sending out deeper roots in search of nutrients. This explains why the pomegranate has found an apparently ideal habitat in this area: completely flat terrain at sea level, and occasionally below, with just the right salinity levels. The Mediterranean, only a few kilometers away from the fruit groves, functions as a filter that takes the edge off temperatures and staves off the dreaded frosts that can ruin entire harvests.

People around here maintain that: “...pomegranates need moist sea air. They can’t survive without it,” and to





N A T U R A L M E D I C I N E

Babylonian soldiers used to chew pomegranate grains before going into battle, convinced that the fruit's characteristic resilience would make them invincible. Hippocrates, who in classical Antiquity launched the famous "let food be your medicine" principle, used to recommend that his patients drink pomegranate juice to bring down a fever, while Discorides, surgeon to the Roman army, considered it the best remedy for flatulence. Throughout the centuries, healers from various cultures have prescribed pomegranates for ailments ranging from conjunctivitis to hemorrhoids, with pharyngitis and laryngitis in between. What in olden times was intuited empirically has now been validated by scientific testing. Modern medicine has shown that far from being an old wives' tale, this fruit does indeed possess health-giving properties that qualify it as a super-food. (This term, referring to foodstuffs that prevent the progressive deterioration responsible for common pains and diseases, was popularized in 2004 in the blockbuster book by Canadian nutritionist Steven Pratt). Pomegranates now rank alongside berries and green tea in the pantheon of foods with outstanding nutritional and anti-oxidant properties. Instrumental in their ascent have been scientists such as Dr. Michael Aviram, also an exponent of the benefits of wine-derived tannins. His research at the University of Haifa, Israel, has recently shown that pomegranate polyphenols lower cholesterol levels in the blood, thereby reducing the risk of a heart attack. Research by Dr. David Holtzman, Head of Neurology at the University of Washington School of Medicine, has found that these polyphenols also appear to have neuroprotective properties. Still in the US, in 2005 the University of Madison published the results of several studies affirming that regular consumption of pomegranate juice inhibits the growth and progress of prostate cancer, a claim seconded by Dr. Alan Pantuck, urologist at the University of California's Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center. Many more beneficial effects are attributed to pomegranates, including that they are estrogenic, anti-inflammatory, antiseptic and aid digestion. And all the indicators show that the list is far from complete just yet.

judge by the size and weight of the specimens before us, there's a lot in what they say. Having said that, the outer look and color of a pomegranate should not be taken as an indicator of quality. Strangely enough, even the ripest pomegranates in the Mollar de Elche family never go bright red. Their natural color range lies between tones of orange and deep pink. That being the case, how does one know when the fruit is at its peak? Pepe Botella, director of Elche's Copelche Cooperative, reveals two basic yardsticks: perfectly rounded shape and a good weight to size ratio (irrefutable evidence that the pomegranate in question is full of juice). "Today's consumers are learning how to select them in the supermarket," he comments. "After years of buying tomatoes that look perfect but lack flavor, we know that appearances can be deceptive when choosing fruit." Mollar de Elche pomegranates may be unlikely to win first prize in a beauty contest as they have a less pronounced outer color than other varieties, but they are packed with a secret treasure in the form of delicious, sweet, red pulp-encased seeds known as arils.

Natural spheres

These days, the notion of seasonal fruits is something of an illusion. Increasingly, many crops are grown in both hemispheres and maintain a presence on our supermarket shelves throughout the year. Tomatoes in winter, oranges in summer... thanks to globalization, they find their way



R E A D Y - T O - E A T

While some enjoy the ritual of cutting a pomegranate in half and carefully extracting its tiny grains, or arils, others can't be bothered. Aware of the fact that pomegranates can be perceived as "hard to eat", several European producers have been casting about over the last few years for new, more user-friendly presentations. More specifically, companies from Spain, France, Israel and Greece joined forces in 2000, under the EU's financial umbrella to develop technology capable of peeling pomegranates, separating their arils by color and packing them in convenient containers.

Spain's representative in the project was Altabix, whose premises we are visiting today. Santiago Mira, founder over 50 years ago of a company that is now one of the biggest agricultural enterprises in Elche, hands me a gown and advises me to put it on before entering the next room. The department where the arils are removed and packed is something of a separate entity with respect to the premises as a whole: "It's our operating room, our cutting-edge technology laboratory." In an icy cold and practically sterile environment where the air is renewed every minute, several workers are keeping an eye on the mechanical aril extraction machine. Surprisingly, it seems to be quite straightforward: compressed water and air are used to gently deseed the whole pomegranates. The gleaming, ruby red arils are then transferred to another piece of equipment which uses artificial vision to group them by different shades of color. This is the first machine of its kind in the world and was developed in conjunction with the Valencian Institute for Agrarian Research (IVIA). "There were already machines on the market capable of separating many fruits by color, but pomegranates posed an extra problem because their arils are so tiny and tend to stick together because of their high concentration of sugars," explains José Blasco, head of the artificial vision laboratory at IVIA's agricultural engineering center. It took them four years to put the final touches on a machine that, today, can process between three and six tonnes (13,227 lbs) of arils per week. Packed in trays, and without the aid of coloring or preservatives, they leave the Elche plant bound for the food halls of Marks & Spencer in the UK and many other destinations all over Europe.

Applying the ready-to-eat approach to one of the oldest fruits in the world has been a great success, and pomegranates needed a radical makeover to bring them up-to-date. Nonetheless, the more nostalgic among us will be relieved to know that we can still buy our pomegranates whole and set about eating them in the traditional way.

to our tables from all corners of the planet. There are still some romantics around who refuse to yield to this kind of internationalization and prefer to wait patiently for the fruits in their own territory to ripen. Among those at the forefront of this school of thought are chefs, who are perfectly willing to scour the world for new flavors, yet stout defenders of products from their home patch. In the Alicante province, many of them have been hanging on for the better part of a year: pomegranates are a winter fruit in this part of the world, making an appearance in September or October and remaining available until January or February. During that period, they feature on the menus of many local restaurants, such as two-Michelin-star-holder El Poblet in Denia, an engaging town on the Alicante coast. Head chef Quique Dacosta is showcasing Spanish pomegranates on his menu again this year. "I think I've been using them since I started here," he beams, "and I've always tried to capitalize on their texture, which is crunchy and sweet and juicy at the same time, with acidic, bitter overtones." Among the dishes coming out of his kitchen today are eye-catching crystallized apple bow-shaped puff pastries with aloe, sweet leaf tea and pomegranate. He is also into exploring textural interplay at the moment—"very simple, but the results are magic." Here's just one example: freshly made creamy mandarin sorbet to which unadorned fresh pomegranate arils are added just as it goes into the sorbetière. Leaving the sea behind us, we now head for inland Alicante. Kiko





S W E E T M E M O R I E S

Certain products make their mark on *Spain Gourmetour's* editorial team. Pomegranates are a case in point: for our colleague Carlos Tejero, they trigger vivid childhood memories. He shares them with us here.

As well as being an inexhaustible fount of popular sayings, my grandfather was a convinced herbalist. He maintained that pomegranate root was good for getting rid of tapeworms (a parasite from which, I'm pleased to report, no-one in my family had ever suffered). Nevertheless, worried that he was, he decided to plant a pomegranate tree in his orchard so as to have an effective vermifuge on hand just in case.

As time went by and the plant grew, I was never aware of any root removal taking place, which was, I suppose, a good sign. What I do remember is that around May or June, the tree would come into bloom. It did so timidly, over several weeks, unlike the almond trees which bloom almost overnight. The flowers, large, bell shaped and bright orangey red, would appear gradually. Later, the fruit would appear in the calyx, a green berry that grew into a spherical shape over the following weeks.

By October, the fruit would be almost completely grown, its skin a glossy

yellow or red, depending on how much it had been exposed to the sun (surprisingly, the most intensely colored arils in a pomegranate occur in that part of the fruit that has had the least amount of sun). By chance, this pomegranate tree had been planted between a loquat and a willow, taller and leafier than itself, so that the sun's rays had little effect on it.

My grandfather did not look after the pomegranate tree much. I was to learn later that because it was watered only erratically while it was growing, the fruit cracked open when ripe, revealing their inner treasure. That was the point at which I would pick and eat them, so my brain associates maximum sweetness with a pomegranate that has split open of its own accord. But that's not how you find them in the shops. For obvious commercial reasons, the fruit on offer is whole, with smooth, satiny skin. No-one will buy a split pomegranate.

The orchard where the pomegranate tree once stood no longer exists, so if I need pomegranates I have to shop for them these days, and that's not as simple as it sounds. As far as I'm concerned, eating a pomegranate is a ritual that starts with selecting the fruit. If I know and trust the fruit seller, I take his advice. If not, or if I'm shopping at

the supermarket, I observe certain guidelines. I buy just the one pomegranate, for eating that same day; it must weigh between 200 and 300 g (7 and 10 1/2 oz) and be perfectly shaped; it must be yellow-to-red in color; the skin must not be too smooth; it must be firm but not too hard to the touch and, like a melon, its weight should be proportional to its size. If all these requirements are met, there is every chance of finding fruity perfection when I cut it open.

I rarely get excited about food, and when I do it is probably about something rather basic. Enjoyment, now, is quite another matter. I always enjoy eating, but getting a thrill out of food, a real thrill, is not something I experience often. One of the few things that does the trick is sitting down to an enormous, round, ripe pomegranate. I go off on my own, ignore all distractions, and with an almost ecstatic absorption, launch into the ritual.

I place the pomegranate on a plate. Using a very sharp knife, I cut discs about 6 cm (2.4 in) in diameter from the crown and base. I then score four radial cuts whose purpose is to help divide the fruit into four portions. The cuts need to be quite shallow, just deep enough to go through the leathery skin

Moya, who runs the one-Michelin-star restaurant L'Escaleta in Cocentaina, loves pomegranates. "Those trees have been there all my life. They were the backdrop to my childhood," he recalls. "In the local repertoire they are categorized in the dessert department, but pomegranates are such a versatile fruit that they can be used throughout the menu." Like Quique, Kiko emphasizes the importance of their exceptional texture. "Visually, the red grains have the same jewel-like look as

fish roe. Those little natural spheres burst in your mouth, leaving a sensation of freshness, sweetness, acidity and bitterness all at the same time. It's quite an explosion of flavors." As our conversation draws to a close, he tells me about his latest experiments with unusual combinations of ingredients: "I associate pomegranates with Arab culture. That in turn suggests rose water, ginger, cinnamon, dates, saffron..." he explains. "I'm only trying out tentative combinations so far, but I know for certain that

something good will develop!" As it happens, doing unconventional things with saffron was what earned Maria José Román a place in the food and wine pages of *The New York Times*. This enquiring, self-taught chef experiments with new products in her restaurant, Monastrell, on a daily basis. Her saffron period would seem to have been succeeded by a Mollar de Elche pomegranate one or, more specifically, its concentrated juice reduced down into a paste: "...like our traditional Spanish *arropes* and *melazas* (grape and

without damaging the arils within. That's the preparatory stage. Next, I grasp the fruit in both hands over the plate and firmly but gently prise the sections apart, relishing the crunch between my fingers as the first jewels fall. I then proceed to separate the arils from the pericarp and the various cuticles that divide up the fruit's interior. With patience worthy of a Franciscan, I gradually build up a heap of polyhedral arils, looking like little juicy building blocks irregularly hewn by Mother Nature.

Prompted by my salivary glands, at last I dig in pleasurably with my spoon. Yes, a good old-fashioned spoon is my utensil of choice for scooping up the prepared pomegranate grains. Few pleasures can compare with that first spoonful of ruby morsels that explode in my mouth as I chew, releasing their fresh sweetness. It's the taste of my childhood.

Journalist and pomegranate-lover Carlos Tejero is editorial co-coordinator of spaingourmetour.com.



honey syrups) except that in this case pomegranate rather than grape must is cooked down slowly," she explains. María José uses the resulting syrup as an accompaniment to countless dishes. "Its properties are similar to, or even better than, those of balsamic vinegar," she explains. "Its heady aroma enhances the flavor of walnuts and indeed nuts in general, sharpens the flavor of poultry and pork, gives a little acidic zing to fish and a touch of astringency to salads." She admits to having looked to the traditional cooking of such countries as Iran and India for her inspiration, where pomegranates are a common ingredient in everyday cooking. "When the season starts,

pomegranate juice is one of the most popular choices at street stalls," she explains, "and in Turkey, pomegranate juice is used like vinegar for dressing salads."

The stuff of legend

Cairo-born food writer Claudia Roden, acclaimed expert in the history of Mediterranean food, coined the adage "a country's food reflects its history". She has studied Jewish culinary tradition and its links with that of Spain, which she defines as a happy fusion of Sephardic and Muslim food. In her *Book of Jewish Food*, she mentions the symbolic significance of pomegranates, particularly during the solemn yet

festive Jewish New Year celebrations, when they symbolize "fecundity and renewal... Oriental New Year meals end with fresh dates, figs and above all pomegranates—all of which are mentioned in the Bible—as the new fruits of the season. In Egypt, we thought pomegranates would cause our family to bear many children". Pomegranates are also popularly believed to contain 613 seeds, the same number as there are commandments mentioned in the Torah.

Fertility, abundance, perfection, carnal desire, hope... The pomegranate's exotic nature evokes associations with abstract nouns. According to Greek mythology, the first pomegranate was planted by



Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty; however, in the story of Persephone, daughter of Zeus, who was led astray by grains of pomegranate, the fruit symbolizes evil sweetness. When Roman brides wore a headdress made of pomegranate branches, it represented a future blessed with many children, while for St. John of the Cross, figurehead of Christian mysticism, the pomegranate exemplified the innumerable divine perfections, eternity and spiritual joy. Mentioned in the Torah, the Koran and the tales of *The thousand and one nights*, the pomegranate has left its mark on legends, stories and poems. André Gide, Nobel Prize Winner for Literature, described the pomegranate's fascinating structure as "hidden treasure, wrapped up in tulle", while the revered Persian poet Ferdowsi declared that "only the blushing cheeks of the beloved can compare with it".

Federico García Lorca devoted a long poem to the pomegranate, praising its beauty along these lines: "It is a tiny beehive/with a bloodstained honeycomb/for it was shaped by its bees/from womens' mouths./That is why it bursts open laughing/with the red of a thousand lips..." Who needs an advertising campaign?

Celia Hernando is a journalist that has worked with the radio stations Cadena Ser and Punto Radio and is a trainee journalist at Spain Gourmetour.



W E B S I T E S

www.campodeelche.com

Campo de Elche's company website tells you everything you need to know about Mollar de Elche pomegranates: their provenance, nutritional properties, related articles and so on. Orders for fruit and juice of this variety can be placed via this site. (Spanish)

www.altabix.com

Altabix's website provides information about the company and sells its products on the internet. (Spanish)

www.cambayas.com

Cambadas Cooperative of Elche's website. This company sells figs, oranges and vegetables as well as pomegranates. (English, Spanish)