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A Fig's Tale

Missionaries < Hucksters < Desperately Lonely Wasps; What A FRUITS OF CALIFORNIA Long < Strange Trip It's Been

August 11, 1999 | DAVID KARP, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

"What fruit has the eye of a widow and the cloak of a beggar?" asks an old Spanish riddle. Answer: a really ripe fig, revealing its honeyed lusciousness by a teardrop of syrup at the bottom and a tattered skin.

For millenniums, voluptuous figs, fresh and dried, have inspired aficionados to mania. So much of the story of figs seems mythic: the miracle of caprifigation, in which a tiny, frustrated wasp plays Cupid to figs; the breakthrough a century ago that harnessed this process for California farmers; the saga of the Los Angeles promoter who founded a Fresno fig empire with 660,000 blasts of dynamite.

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Today, the California fresh fig is enjoying a renaissance. Paradoxically, that is attributable, at least in part, to ruinously low prices for the dried ones. Fig lovers can look forward to increasing shipments of the best fresh varieties arriving at markets and farm stands this week.

Figs were introduced to California by Franciscan missionaries, starting with the founding of Mission San Diego in 1769. The dark-skinned, pink-fleshed Mission fig was the only kind grown here until the 1850s, when settlers brought other varieties from the East Coast and Europe.

After statehood, a modest fig industry developed in the Sacramento Valley, focused on dried figs. By the 1880s, growers recognized that the Fresno area--the hottest, driest part of the Central Valley--is ideally adapted to the fig and expanded their plantings there, mostly of the green-skinned Adriatic variety.

Only one thing was lacking: the Smyrna fig, the "true fig of commerce," which has a unique nutty flavor and brought the highest prices. In 1880, G. P. Rixford of the San Francisco Evening Bulletin imported 14,000 cuttings of this variety from Turkey, which he distributed to subscribers. The trees flourished, but, to everyone's dismay, the figs dropped, unripe, at walnut size.

After several more fruitless importations, many Californians concluded that they'd been hoodwinked by the Turks.

The problem was that, although most figs (called common figs) bear fruit to maturity on their own, Smyrna figs must be pollinated by *Blastophaga psenes*, the fig wasp. This gnat-sized insect lives only in dry, inedible wild figs, called caprifigs.

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