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Backward Figs from Brooklyn

This Blog

Joey Sklee (September 28, 2008)



Figs Joseph Sciorra

In which this blogger says nothing more profound than he really, really likes figs.

I love figs picked from backyard trees in Brooklyn.

I love figs more than mozzarella di bufala, more than a simple plate of rigatoni with tomato sauce, and even more than fried zucchini flowers (a subject deserving its own future post).

I covet the bountiful container in which they often arrive in my hands, the tree's wide leaves used as bedding and blankets. I yearn for the various stages of ripeness in which they present themselves to me, their starburst bottoms exploding open. I hanker for the black purplish flesh that swims around my mouth, clinging to my teeth. And I crave the pulpy, purple red flesh, sweet and sticky, dissolving across my tongue, sliding down my throat.

Perhaps my insatiable appetite is driven by the simple fact that I own neither a backyard nor a fig tree, and that my desperate pursuit of this late summer fruit fuels my lust. (I will never forget my

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84-year-old Uncle Nick's request when, in the summer of 1986, I asked him what he wanted me to bring back from his hometown Carunchio in Abruzzo, a place he hadn't visited since the early 1930s: "Figs. Fresh figs.") For a while, an elderly couple on my block provided me with the cornucopic excess of their backyard tree. But they have long since passed and now I scrounge the borough of Brooklyn for my annual fix.

Italian Americans have planted, cultivated, and harvested fig trees all over Brooklyn. For decades, the assiduously wrapped and bounded trees, capped with plastic buckets, have haunted the borough's winter landscape like captive souls in a de Chirico painting.



"Yard With Wrapped Fig Tree, Brooklyn" by Edward Coppola

Gardeners have begun abandoning the ritual wrapping of the trees either because the Mediterranean *figus carica* has adapted to the northeast climes or global warming has created the ideal conditions. Italian Americans' grand horticultural skills have left a rich legacy throughout the borough from Carroll Gardens to Williamsburg. In these once predominately Italian neighborhoods, "newcomers" – from yuppies to hipsters – now reap the delicious bounty of those nurtured fig trees. I am admittedly envious.

I'm not sure when my gluttonous obsession began. I don't remember eating backyard figs before my late teens. The summer fig is not my madeleine of a lost Italian-American childhood, as it is for so many.

It was only a few years ago that my mother finally planted a fig tree in the backyard garden, where over the years she has cultivated tomatoes, arugula, peppers, zucchini, and peaches. Two years ago, the tree finally fruited.



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That summer my father brought a huge tray of figs to my brother's house where we siblings were taking turns caring for my mother who had broken her arm. I was the only one of the four children at home that day. I immediately devoured a dozen figs right in a row, then slowly ate some more. When I was done – how did I stop myself? – I placed the remaining fruit in the smaller bowl, declaring later by phone, “Oh, by the way, dad said he brought some figs after I left. I think he put them in the frig.”

My rapacious desire for backyard figs kicks in when a co-worker brings in the overflow from his tree to the office. I sneak into the office's common room, scoop up a dozen (or so) figs, scuttle back to my office, and then casually return to my colleague's generous gift, proclaiming loudly, “Oh, look, fresh figs!” And then I take another three (or four).

By September 18th I had had three glorious encounters with backyard figs: from my parents; from my co-worker; and from my friend Anthony Scotto. By this week, I was jonesing for more.

Then on Wednesday, Anthony emailed me with this message:

Joe, hope all is well... just picked about 50 figs yesterday, and the tree is still quite full with both ripe and ripening fruit. If you're going to be in my area any time soon, you're welcome to drop by and take whatever you can pick. Anthony

My mouth watered. Between work and family obligations, I was unable to venture to the other end of Brooklyn. I was desperate. When I replied that it was impossible to visit him in Bensonhurst, Anthony wrote back the following day:

no worries. I was up in the trees this morning (picked nearly a hundred these past three days) and there are still many unripe figs

Scores of ripe figs mine for the plucking.

It's a rainy Sunday afternoon and the last figs of the season are calling me with their siren song, enticing me to a backyard in Brooklyn.

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- [A Tree That Spans Years and Continents](#)
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• [Where Art Imitates Gardening \(and Vice Versa\)](#)



• [When Figs Fall in Brooklyn, It's Time to Party](#)



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On September 29th, 2008 Iruberto wrote Laura Ruberto wrote



Delicious but....

you don't mention Joseph Tusiani's "La velatura del fico" (in [_From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana_](#))—one of my all-time favorites! Even with the abundance of figs right now out here in California, your post & that short story take me back to the backyard of my grandparent's house in yet another Italian American neighborhood--Bloomfield (Pittsburgh, PA)! –Laura R.

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