

# Messy and Picky

Eating our way through Philadelphia

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## Giovanni: The Man Behind the Figs

by [Picky](#)



There he is, Giovanni, the man behind the gorgeous *fico paradiso* I, and most of the SE PA region loves. Earlier this month, I stood in Giovanni's driveway, under his enormous fig tree in South Philadelphia and talked with him about his tree, his dreams and one of his troubles.

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Here's Giovanni standing underneath the giant single tree. The tree which bears enough fruit to bring in 40 dozen or so figs to the [farmstand](#) each week for the better part of 2 months in early fall. The 33-year-old tree stands about 25' tall stretching into the south of Packer Ave driveway (and that's as close as you're getting to coordinates people) towards the setting western sun. The tree is so laden with green fruit, it resembles stalks of brussels sprouts with fig leaves sprouting forth. Giovanni, who came to Philadelphia about 35 years ago, planted a persimmon tree on his property first and then the fig tree. The persimmons get eaten by pesky squirrels and

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birds while still unripe, but Giovanni has a fighting chance against the early rising fauna of South Philly.



He showed me around his tree's trunk. He pointed to the foremost stump in the photo above. "That was the first one" he said. He then lead me around the tree pointing to more stumps. The master fig man told me how the tree had died about 10 times over the years. He recalled neighbors and friends telling him Philadelphia was too cold for fig trees to survive in the winter and that one had to wrap them tightly in plastic to keep them warm. He took their advice and wrapped his tree. Months went by and he cut back the wrap to discover a rotten sapling. He vowed from then on to never wrap his tree. It came with a price though as the tree died on him. But each time, it spawned another trunk. Now, with about 7 trunks sprouting from the base, this tree is here to stay. Most of Philly's other fig trees are somewhat protected from the elements by several walls; Giovanni's is exposed to a mighty draft down a wide alleyway, but the tree weathers on.

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While browsing through the bottom most branches, he recalled the 15 or so fig trees his family had while growing up in Italy. He recalled heading out every day while the figs were in season to pick shirt fulls of figs. His family would dry the figs in the sunlight and pack them for storage to enjoy throughout the year. He noted how people take food for granted these days as one can have anything at any time. Nobody preserves food anymore, he said. It's true, but people like Marisa McClellan of [Food in Jars](#) are trying to change that! He pointed to California figs for an apropos comparison. He wasn't knocking the figs of California, just that when shipping figs across country, they can't possibly be picked ripe. They arrive on the east coast with dry insides. Seasonal foods should be cherished when they are in season, it's part of what makes them so special.

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After finding a ripe fig (he had just picked his tree that morning so just about all of the ripe ones were already picked), he showed me how he likes to enjoy his figs. First, look for a fig which is just starting to burst at the sides. Take it off at the stem. Giovanni prefers to peel his figs, like a banana, and then eat them. He started off peeling one for me quite effortlessly. I put down my camera and finished it off, but in quite a clumsy matter. I'm more used to chomping into a fig one half at a time. Eating one of his green figs with no skin was a completely different textural experience. The white shell of the peeled fig is somewhat like a tangerine once peeled, but much softer and without the structural integrity.

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Here's the peeled fig with a gorgeous green leaf behind it. There's nothing quite like a ripe fig.



A look straight up the interior of the tree. It's a thick canopy, but there were plenty of figs growing inside the canopy.

While talking about different kinds of fig trees in the area – a neighbor has candy red figs, another neighbor brown figs, a friend on Wharton with the same green figs under a plastic canopy yielding year-round fruit – he told me of a recent trip to Australia with his wife. He spent 3 months in Australia going all over the island. Wishing he had the money to have more land in a climate like Australia, he told me the figs grow very well down there. Bountiful and high quality. Shifting back to his South Philly digs, he told me of some of the problems he's had with his tree.

The squirrels. Oh man do they get on his nerves. They seem to make a dent on the figs, but it's the damage to his persimmon crop which really gets his blood curdling. He had to cut off all the fruit bearing limbs of the tree as the problem was getting out of hand. He had one idea a few years ago to try to get rid of them. He got his hands on the hottest jalapeno peppers he could find and fried them up in some oil. He added in handfuls of peanuts to soak up the heat. It was at this point where I said it sounded like an absolutely delicious treat and he smiled. He cooked the peanuts and removed them from the pan to dry out. He scattered the hot peanuts in his garden and got up nice and early to watch the squirrels squirming. Only he found the squirrels mightily enjoying his trap. It only made him more angry, but he was able to laugh about it with me in hindsight.



He took me around the tree to show me how he had been cutting the topmost branches to promote side growth and to allow him to still get to the topmost branches to harvest figs. If he didn't keep the taller branches in check, the tree would quickly get out of hand as fig trees grow quite a bit each year. He also showed me a sapling he recently planted. It was bearing some unripe green fruit. Giovanni

proudly told me those figs would be a dark blue color when ripe and that they were a late variety so he'd be able to enjoy figs a little longer than most. Smart man. The tree has a few years until it'll yield anything resembling a bounty like it's cousin a few feet from its trunk, but I'm sure Giovanni will have another winner on his hands.



I thanked Giovanni for his time and sharing of knowledge and I was on my way back to Center City. Biking through numerous neighborhoods, my head was on a swivel looking for the trademark fig leaf peeking out from properties. I've spotted about 20 fig trees in my biking trips through Philly so far and I've foraged from many of them. I have my "wild" favorites, but it's Giovanni's *fico paradiso* which reign as top dog in



my book. Giovanni said that come winter, he'd give me a branch to start a fig tree of my own. I excitedly accepted his offer without having an actual plot of land to plant it. I think I have a friend who'd be up for it though.

Giovanni's figs are available for purchase at Fair Food Farmstand in [Reading Terminal Market](#) by the 12th St entrance for \$4 per half dozen. More / larger photos in [this flickr set](#).

#### [Fair Food Farmstand](#)

Tu – Sat: 8a – 6p

Su: 9a – 5p

Mon: Closed, but starting October 5, 8a – 6p

215.627.2029

[Reading Terminal Market](#)

12th & Arch Sts

This entry was posted on Monday, September 28th, 2009 at 9:14 am and is filed under [Interview/Talk](#), [South Philly](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

### 7 Responses to “Giovanni: The Man Behind the Figs”

1.

**ThadS** says:

[September 28, 2009 at 1:26 pm](#)

Awesome article! I had read your previous post about these figs, and immediately went out and got some at RTM. Thanks again for the heads up, but now I am hooked!

[Reply](#)

2.

**gabriel** says:

[September 30, 2009 at 6:34 pm](#)

I love this guy

he should be on tv

[Reply](#)

3.

**julia** says:

[October 5, 2009 at 5:21 pm](#)

I WANT GIOVANNI TO BE MY GRAMPA. Is it too late to make that happen?

Boy oh boy. He is the cutest old Italian man I think I've ever seen.

Those glasses. Ugh. Maybe they're Gucci? Maybe D&G? haha My knees just got weak.

[Reply](#)

4.

**Madame Fromage** says:

[October 9, 2009 at 7:24 pm](#)

This is wonderful. A great profile. It makes me want to grow figs.

[Reply](#)

5.



**Alexandra Harcharek** says:

[October 12, 2009 at 4:52 pm](#)

Awwwww. Really great article.

I absolutely adore figs. There is a fig tree growing outside my window now and I keep leaning down to pick them in the morning. Perfect breakfast. Or lunch. Actually, there's no bad time for fresh figs.

[Reply](#)

6.

**FRESH FIGS FOR COLD CLIMES « phigblog** says:

[October 16, 2009 at 10:02 pm](#)

[...] Check out this awesome article about Giovanni of South Philly, "The Man Behind the Figs". [...]

[Reply](#)

7.

**Tony** says:  
[November 19, 2009 at 10:34 am](#)

My grandpa had two fig trees in Hoboken, New Jersey back in the 50's / 60's. He wrapped them from the bottom up with tarpaper and capped them with an old white porcelain pail. Had great figs each year. When they began to ripen, he sat at the back window and stood watch. When we tried to steal some he'd wait till our hands were just on them and yell out the window! He got a big kick out of that! We still managed to get some!

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