

THE REBIRTH OF THE FIG

By Ellen Walsh

The DeBenedetto Family creates D'Best . The Premium Label in today's Fresh Fig Market



Beautiful, voluptuous, and sweet to the taste, the first stories of figs trace back to biblical times. One of the first fruits to be dried and stored by mankind, ancient cities dating back to 600 BC include the fig in their folklore. Early Spanish missionary fathers first planted fig trees in the San Diego Mission in 1759, and were responsible for planting them at each succeeding mission as they headed north. The fig was loved, desired, and transported everywhere. However, it didn't thrive everywhere. The fig loved the hot, dry, desert like climate of the San Joaquin Valley the most.



Less sweet than the other varieties, the darker yellowish green fruit is shaped like a tear drop. Although it is used often as a canned or stewed fruit, it is delightful to eat fresh.

We are speaking of the taste of fresh figs, growing in California's San Joaquin Valley, and the grower's are the DeBenedetto family, a three generation family business of Italian descent, recognized as the premium label in fresh figs.

Figs of the varieties grown in California have always been able to be picked fresh. However, the harvesting techniques required were different and much more

The black fig is known today as the **Mission fig**, appropriately named during that particular time in history. It's deep, rich purple color distinguishes it from the other figs, yielding a pinkish flesh ranging from a watermelon like color, to the deeper pink of a strawberry. It's distinctive rich flavor is enhanced by the dry heat of California, and the hotter the weather, the more luscious the fruit.

The golden brown **Calimyrna fig**, was brought to California from Turkey in 1882, and also thrives today in the San Joaquin Valley. It's yellow-green with white fleck coloration produces a white meat, with an amber to light strawberry textured like pulp. It also has a rich, nutty flavor, sweet to the taste. It's nutty taste is a direct result of **caprification**,* a pollination process, unique to the samyrna type fig, of which the calimyrna is part of. Each fig of this type will have a different taste as a result of the caprification process, a little known fact, apparent only when you are tasting figs in their fresh form.

The **Kadota** fig is thick skinned and a little less seedy, because the seed is hollow. Producing a stronger and more distinctive flavor than its

counterparts, it is less crunchy in texture. The Kadota fig is **parthenocarpic** . it does not require pollination . therefore it is more consistent.



labor intensive. Within the confines of the fig growers, it has always been known that fresh figs, picked at the height of ripeness off the trees, are succulent, juicy, with heightened flavors. However, in the early days of fig production, there were some extra considerations.

Mauro, the Patriarch of the family, along with a handful of growers in the San Joaquin Valley, picked and packed fresh figs during the day, and transported them without refrigeration to San Francisco by the next day. It took careful planning to capture the premium fresh quality of the fig. This was all accomplished during the depression. The government was creating a guaranteed sale of dried figs to the growers, by purchasing all unused dried fruit that was not sold for consumption. They would then distill it to make alcohol, which would then be made into fuel. There was little incentive to sustain the labor intensive market of fresh figs during the course of WWII.

The fresh figs, however, tasted wonderful. Carefully handpicked and saved for the families of the growers, fresh figs continued to be a "secret", making its way to market by a very narrow, "niche" demand. The average shelf life of the fresh fig is one of the shortest in the industry, representing a 10 . 15 day shelf life, tops. It must be picked at the height of its freshness, because it does not ripen once it is picked. Compare this with other fruits of the industry, with the delicate kiwis having one of the longest shelf lives.



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