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A Fig's Tale

By DAVID KARP, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

August 11, 1999

"This is nothing," says Alan Weeks. "A few days ago it was 123 degrees. No way do I go out in the middle of the day."

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The Central Valley's main crop begins in late July and early August. On a sultry morning, Maury DeBenedetto Sr., whose family has farmed in Fresno since 1934, arrives at dawn to direct the harvest of Kadotas at a Fig Garden orchard.

Despite the heat, the pickers wear long sleeves to shield their arms from the short bristly hairs on the fig leaves as they reach deep into the trees for ripe fruit. They also wear surgical gloves to protect their hands from the milky sap that oozes from the stalks as they clip off the figs. It contains ficin, a protein-digesting enzyme that irritates skin.

"Years ago," says DeBenedetto, "young Italian men in Fresno used to tattoo the names of their girlfriends on their arms with fig sap."

He takes a golden-green Kadota from a picker's bucket and peels off the thick skin, revealing strawberry-colored pulp. Normally Kadotas, which don't need to be caprifigged, have lighter amber pulp, but this one has been pollinated by an errant wasp from a nearby Calimyrna orchard, giving it a darker hue and grainier texture.

In the middle of the orchard, shaded by the canvas roof of a field wagon, women sort and pack the figs. In hours, the cartons will be on jets to New York and Toronto, where large communities of people of Greek and Italian origin pay top dollar for the best figs.

Though the fresh fig market is growing, the vast majority of California's fig harvest is dried. Picking of dried figs starts in August and runs through September.

For several decades, most growers have harvested dried figs mechanically, but at his vast ranch northeast of Madera, Paul Mesple still sets out fresh-picked Kadotas on trays to dry and turn white in the sun. Virtually all of these figs are exported to eastern Asia, where soups of boiled dried figs are a traditional tonic for restoring strength.

A few miles away, near Chowchilla, Kevin Herman, who farms 3,000 acres of figs, oversees the various stages of the mechanized harvest. First, men wielding hefty wooden mallets knock partly dried Missions off the trees onto the smooth orchard floor. Later, machines blow and sweep the figs into rows between the trees.

At the nearby Bump City ranch, Herman follows a tractor that sucks up the rows of fully dried Adriatic figs and deposits them in a big wooden bin, along with plenty of leaves and other debris. "It's a dusty job, especially for the poor guy on the back of the tractor," he says.

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