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A Fig's Tale

By DAVID KARP, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

August 11, 1999

Fresh Calimyrnas are merely scrumptiously sweet, and drying concentrates the flavor to honeyed perfection. However, dried Calimyrnas are as difficult to farm as they're delicious to eat. As Herman observes, "Cals will turn a young man old real quick."

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The chief problem is that the same fig wasps that pollinate the seeds, giving Calimyrnas their distinctive nutty crunch, also introduce fungi and smuts that spoil a high percentage of the crop. "Naturals," large perfect dried figs, are rare.

A researcher at the University of California Kearney station, Jim Doyle, has spent nine years trying to breed the Holy Grail of fig growers: a new variety with the flavor of Calimyrna that doesn't require caprifigation. Judging from a recent tasting of his most promising selections, he's tantalizingly close, but complete success might be out of reach: Fertilized seeds seem essential to the Calimyrna's flavor.

The half-dozen leading varieties of figs are well suited to commercial cultivation, but connoisseurs and collectors around the state claim that some of the more unusual kinds offer far superior flavor.

"People rarely get to taste the best varieties of figs," claims Howard Garrison, field manager of the National Clonal Germplasm Repository collection at Winters.

Of the 140 varieties of figs under his care, his favorite is the outlandish Panachee, a green and yellow striped fig with a touch of acidity to balance its sweetness. But the Violette de Bordeaux, a dusky beauty with red pulp, astounds the palate with layer on layer of complex, interesting flavors and

a subtle, lingering aftertaste.

Though the San Joaquin Valley is fig central, the Southland has seen its share of fig farms and follies. A land scheme similar to Forkner's led to the planting of 5,680 acres of figs in the San Jacinto Basin of Riverside County in the 1920s. Because of low prices and water problems, just three acres remained by 1938.

Only vestiges survive of the fig gardens once common in the San Fernando Valley, but three commercial farmers with 10 acres or more still thrive in North San Diego County. They sell their crops, mostly Brown Turkeys and Kadotas, to Los Angeles wholesalers and prefer to keep a low profile.

"Please don't tell anyone about me," begs one grower in Escondido. "People call me up and talk for hours about figs or sneak into the orchard in the middle of the night to eat their fill."

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