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Seduction by fig

By Russ Parsons, Times Staff Writer
September 06, 2006

IT is almost impossible to describe a fresh fig without veering into pornography. The skin is nearly human in its tenderness. And the pulp within is as luscious as some exotic cross between fruit jam and honey. You don't so much bite into a fig as engage it in a long, sweet kiss.

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They're so beautiful and so fragile-seeming that you'd think they must be available only at the most exclusive markets and at the highest prices. But fresh figs are now showing up in mainstream stores, costing not that much more than an out-of-season apple.

It's ironic that so many people know the fig only as the first name of a cookie named Newton -- that this most sensuous of fruits is familiar only after it has been dried, ground to a paste and used to stuff a healthful high-fiber snack. It's like knowing Angelina Jolie only for her charity work.

Ironic, certainly, but also perfectly understandable. Fig Newtons are still the final resting place for many of the figs that are grown in California. (Nabisco, which makes the cookie, is the biggest buyer of fig paste in the world.)

But an increasing percentage of the state's fig crop is being picked fresh. The fresh fig harvest, which had been inching up during the last decade or so, nearly doubled between 2003 and 2005. One major shipper says his fresh business increased more than 40% in the last year, and that it's nearly triple what it was in 2000.

Though it is true that farmers markets kept the fervor for fresh figs alive when they were otherwise almost impossible to find, the volume and variety of figs offered at them doesn't seem to have increased. Instead, it's places such as Trader Joe's, Whole Foods and Costco, where you can find stacks of

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figs packed in clear plastic clamshell boxes, that are fueling the new interest.

A mystery to many

FRESH still accounts for just less than 10% of the total fig harvest, but from all accounts its growth should continue. The two largest growers of figs, who farm more than half of the acreage in the state, both say their goal is to get fresh figs up to between 25% and 33% of their total harvests.

Before they can do that, though, there are some hurdles to overcome. Most notable among them? Most folks know almost nothing about fresh figs.

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