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## Seduction by fig

By Russ Parsons, Times Staff Writer  
September 06, 2006

Though they are one of the oldest domesticated fruits in the world, mentioned repeatedly in the Bible, figs are a brand new food to most Americans. A recent survey found that only 9% of consumers had knowingly eaten a fig -- dried or fresh -- in the last year (apparently, that first-name cookie connection wasn't a joke). The only other fruit that ranked as low was the guava.

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That leaves fig growers with a decidedly bad news-good news marketing situation.

"There are two sides to the story," says Richard Matoian, manager of the California Fig Advisory Board and the guy in charge of promoting figs, fresh and dried. "Of course, you can say, 'Boy, isn't it terrible that there is such a low percentage of people who have tried figs recently?'

"But the opposite side is that now we have an opportunity to introduce a new fruit to a lot of people who don't have a lot of baggage with it. There aren't very many people who say, 'I just don't like figs.' "

The fig is a most peculiar fruit. In fact, botanically it's not a fruit. It's a flower -- or, more accurately, a cluster of flowers -- turned inside out. The peel is the fleshy base; the pulp on the inside is the collective pistils and stamens of many individual blooms. The actual fruit is what we think of as the fig's seeds -- tiny dried fruits called achenes (just like those on the outside of a strawberry), which each contain an even tinier real seed.

This arrangement, with all the important parts hidden away, creates significant disadvantages when it comes to reproduction. Figs have evolved to get around this in a couple of ways. First, some common fig varieties such as Brown Turkey and Black Mission are self-pollinating -- all of the action

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takes place inside the flower without any help from insects. (And some new varieties don't require pollination -- you can tell these because you won't feel any seeds popping when you bite into them.)

Other fig varieties, including some that have been most important historically, require more particular arrangements. These figs can be pollinated only with the help of a tiny gnat-size wasp, which crawls into the hole at the base of the fig to spread the pollen.

This presented a seemingly insurmountable problem in the early days of the fig industry, before the turn of the century. The Calimyrna, then regarded as the queen of figs in the rest of the world, simply could not be made to bear fruit in California until this relationship was discovered and the fig wasp could be imported along with the trees. Even today, in springtime all over the Central Valley, you'll see 'Calimyrna' orchards decorated with hanging brown paper bags that contain colonies of these wasps.

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