In my view, there are only two essential points about mangoes: they should be sweet and they should be plentiful.

— Mirza Ghalib

My evening began, as so many of mine in Lucknow did, with a cycle-rickshaw ride. I left Café Coffee Day, a new Starbucks-style coffee shop catering to students and call-center workers in Lucknow’s modern commercial center of Hazratganj, to ride to the Aminabad market, fifteen minutes away. Both Hazratganj and Aminabad have histories stretching back for centuries. But while the colonial and Nawabi-era buildings of Hazratganj are now obscured by neon signs and hip storefronts with English names and lettering (Royal Café, John Players, Woodland Shoes), the narrow streets of Aminabad still seem ancient, filled with makeshift stalls, bargain shoppers, and sizzling street food.

Lucknow’s famous melt-in-your-mouth mutton kebabs can be found in the Aminabad market at places like Tunde Kebab, a small restaurant that has served up tasty food for over one hundred years. So, too, can popular Indian dishes like pulao and korma, which reach their pinnacle here in the combination of abundant local vegetables, spicy Mughal meats, and the rich sauces of the Persian Nawabs. Lucknow is also home to unique desserts, such as namash. Made of whipped cream that sets overnight to absorb the evening dew, it is a treat available only during the winter in a few parts of the old city. And then there are the mangoes.

It was early July, the height of the season in this city known for its mangoes, and I was on my way to an evening in tribute to the famous nineteenth-century Urdu poet, Mirza Ghalib. The gathering would also be an opportunity to savor dozens of varieties of mangoes, as Ghalib reputedly had a passion for the fruit. Thus the celebration is known as Aam aur Ghalib—Mangos and Ghalib. It has taken place annually for the past twenty-five years.

At the end of his life Ghalib lived in the Mughal capital of Delhi, in the Ballimaaran neighborhood of the old city, where his house, after years of neglect, has recently been restored. Photographs and a sampling of his couplets hang on the rough stone walls. Ghalib’s poetry, mainly ghazals (rhyming couplets with a refrain) written in refined, Persianized Urdu, is today regarded as some of India’s finest, and he has a devoted following among poetry-loving northern Indians. Yet, much of his personal correspondence with rulers throughout the subcontinent is filled with greedy requests for baskets of mangoes from their royal orchards. Ghalib is reputed to have personally tried most of India’s four thousand varieties of mango. In fact, he is said to have preferred eating mangoes to writing poetry. In one of the most often-repeated anecdotes, the poet and a friend who did not share his obsession watched a donkey approach a heap of mango skins, turn up its nose, and walk away. “See?” the friend said. “Even donkeys don’t eat mangoes.” To which Ghalib replied, “Of course, donkeys don’t eat them!”

First cultivated thousands of years before Christ, mangoes have played a part in Indian religion and folklore ever since, figuring in both Hindu and Buddhist stories and rituals. By the sixteenth century, Hindu and Muslim rulers had taken control of most mango groves and were experimenting to produce new varieties and develop sophisticated growing techniques. In time, the countryside around Lucknow became one of the largest mango-producing regions within the largest mango-producing country in the world.

Varieties nearly three centuries old, first cultivated on a massive scale by the Shia Nawabs of Awadh, are still grown locally. The dussehri mangoes arrive in markets by mid-June. They are plentiful and cheap—twenty rupees (fifty cents) or less for a kilo. Other varieties, large and small, green and yellow, round and oblong, arrive along with them or a little later. Some have fantastic names meaning “sun among fruits,” “beauty of beauties,” and “fruit of paradise.” The sumptuous mangoes of Malihabad, a town outside of Lucknow, are particularly coveted, and since they fetch a significantly higher price, imposters are not unknown in the marketplace. In any case, the cultivated
varieties couldn’t differ more from the small, fibrous, foul-tasting, wild mangoes native to the Himalayan foothills.

Today, miles of massive mango trees, heavily loaded with the lime-green fruit and well loved for their dense shade, line the roads outside Lucknow and beyond. Mango season coincides with a brutally hot time of year, and perhaps that is partly why their cool sweetness is so beloved. Stories are told of locals passing entire days eating mangoes “until the mounds of peels reach their chins.”

Last summer, as I suffered through temperatures climbing toward a hundred and twenty, I often genuinely (and perhaps foolishly?) believed that being there for mango season made my stay worthwhile. But perhaps the heat had addled my brain. Indian newspapers had recently reported the lifting of an eighteen-year-old import ban on Indian mangoes to the United States, meaning that some of the more durable, export-friendly varieties were now available in the States, even if they were selling for thirty to forty dollars a dozen, as Indian friends in New York and Chicago told me.

Leaving the rickshaw, I went into the small, dark Danish Mahal Urdu bookshop, where a fan spun lazily overhead. I was meeting a couple of friends there, to go together to Aam aur Ghalib. A man in the bookshop told us that four hundred people usually turn out for the celebration. The large number surprised us. How many would be presenting poetry to the gathering, we wondered? “Oh, only twenty or twenty-five,” he assured us. “Everyone else is really there to eat mangoes.” He himself would be present—mostly for the mangoes, he added with a laugh.

Ram Advani, a friend who has run a bookshop in Hazratganj since 1951, had told me that in the old days, mangoes weren’t even sold by weight, as they are everywhere today, but by a special unit of measure, the dheri, reserved for mangoes alone and equaling a count of thirty-three. That number seemed shocking, but he pointed out that, if everyone in the family ate three or four mangoes a day, and if the family included aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, as many typically did, a household could easily absorb a daily dheri delivery during the summer season.

As my friends and I made our way through the back alleys of Aminabad, we encountered the usual street traffic: slow-moving cows, cocky young men on scooters, scholarly-looking gentlemen with canes and thick glasses, small groups of women in burqas with children in tow. It was about six in the evening as we entered a crowded courtyard and were greeted by two small banners proclaiming Aam aur Ghalib—one in Hindi Devanagari script, the other in Urdu Nastaliq.
We had arrived just in time. Within minutes, as the sun dipped behind the whitewashed walls of the neighboring houses, the readings began. The temperature was in the nineties, a pleasant relief from the searing temperatures of only a few weeks before. A generator hummed; power cuts are not uncommon during the Lucknow summers. From the roof terraces young men looked down on the gathering. We sat in red plastic chairs along with the rest of the audience, mostly made up of men, although a few women sat at the edges, and a few kids were there, too. Some of the crowd, with their trimmed beards and white caps, were obviously Muslim. (When, a little later, the call to prayer echoed through the neighborhood on tinny loudspeakers, they left en masse.) Others were Hindus or less observant Muslims, and there may have been Christians and atheists as well. Whatever their beliefs, all seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves, breaking into choruses of “Wah, wah, wah!” which, in the tradition of Urdu poetry reading in the north of India, is the usual response to especially appreciated observations and wordplay.

To much hearty laughter, one poet’s verses compared the state’s ex-chief minister and the newly elected chief minister to different varieties of mangoes, while other poets elaborated on the fruit’s virtuous qualities. My friend Robert, a professor of Hindi and Urdu at North Carolina State University, was there to present an Urdu reading of his own. When his turn came, after thanking the host (a man who made his living running a number of gun shops in Aminabad), Robert delivered the expected tribute to Ghalib, then expressed in prose his newfound love for Indian mangoes, which are far more delectable than those found back home.

I had a hard time understanding most of what was said—a result of the faulty outdoor acoustics, the unceasing conversations on all sides of me, and my less-than-fluent Hindi and Urdu. And I wasn’t really familiar with the work of Ghalib. But none of these limitations seemed to matter—I was excited by the idea of eating mangoes. And soon enough, the readings were over. We proceeded with the rest of the audience to an inner courtyard.

Large, brightly colored plastic tubs of water filled with mangoes were lined up on long tables. After picking up plates and knives, most people seemed to know exactly which varieties they wanted, making a beeline for certain ones. Robert and I picked three varieties at random—a large, green, oblong type and two smaller, egg-shaped ones, green and yellow. The larger variety was the sweet and juicy, yet common, dussehri. The smaller, green mango had a lighter, less sweet taste—even a bit flowery. The small yellow one, called safeda, is locally known as a juice-box mango. Without removing its
We rolled it in our hands, mashing the flesh inside to a pulp. After a minute of vigorous rolling it felt like a partially deflated water balloon. We broke off the fruit’s stem to reveal a small hole, to which we attached our lips, sucking out the thick juice until only the pit remained.

As we ate, I was struck by the near silence. People who had been so noisy during the readings were standing with plates heaped with mangoes, discarded skins, and pits, assiduously eating one piece of fruit after another. An older gentleman came around with some small, glossy, dark-purple fruit—jamuns. He said they were very high in antioxidants, and good for diabetes sufferers. I tried one, but it was horribly bitter after the sweet mangoes. I couldn’t finish it.

Within an hour, abandoned plates were piled high, and the mango eaters were washing their hands at a sink near the courtyard’s edge. I was reminded of stories that my Indian friends tell about their childhoods, of being placed on a tarp or in a kiddi pool and being given peeled mangoes. Eating the sticky fruit kept them occupied for hours, after which they got a hosing down or a dunking.

We sat for another hour, conversing with men who were curious about our presence and eager to talk about Lucknow. I kept thinking how pleasant it was to spend the evening with a group of cultured men, reciting poetry and savoring the delicious sweetness of mangoes on a summer night. Did anything comparable happen in the United States? I thought of outdoor barbecues, but for me these gatherings are often sullied with too much beer and sports and an element of machismo. They are nothing like Aam aur Ghalib.

It was dark and just beginning to rain when we finally left. We walked through the festively lit streets of Aminabad, got into a cycle rickshaw, and set off for home.

### Notes


2. Unfortunately, today’s growers face pressure to produce exportable varieties like the popular Alphonso mangoes from Goa and Maharashtra. They are cultivating fewer and fewer heirlooms, which often have a short shelf life and are considered too sweet for the international palate.