A Fig by Any Other Name

Among the earliest memories I have of my grandfather are his soliloquies in broken English regarding overripe fruits and their fate in America. “Papa” John Ferhat Nabhan would often arrive at our house weary, after a long day of driving his blue-gray fruit truck through the sand dunes trying to sell its entire load of fruit. He was a Lebanese immigrant, formerly a sheepherder and camel drover, who had become an itinerant fruit peddler in his newfound land. Inevitably, when his workday was done, he would bring to us a basket of slightly bruised but “supremely ripened” fruit that none of his customers had wanted—perhaps a medley of golden peaches, purplish figs, crimson cherries, greenish plums, and yellow, egg-shaped apricots.

White-haired and thin, with sparkling but sorrowful eyes that often seemed close to crying, Papa always wore a cardigan sweater and a snap-button cap the same blue-gray hue as his fruit-peddling truck. When he came through the door, he would take a basket of the day’s rejected fruit to the kitchen table, set it down, and then take his cap off and see who was around. When I appeared, he would reach his hand out to shake mine, then pop his thumb up in the air, straighten his index finger into the shape of a pistol barrel, and curl up his other fingers below it. I would do the same.

“Hold it right there! Stick ’em up, Papa.”

He would raise his hands above his head and wink, then take my hand and sit me down, snuggled in close to him at the kitchen table in front of the basket of fruit. Even though I was sixty years his younger, he would talk to me as if I were his business partner.

“No, you stick ’em up, Papa.”

“Not so good, the busy-ness today. Tell your Baba this, my habibi, what is wrong with these ’Merican’ that they don’t buy my ribest fruit? How we gonna sell all this fruit, so delicious? My truck still full, what I am gonna do? Look at all of those beautiful color, lovely shabe, they don’t want it none. Look, I say to them, I show you, I say, I cut it oben and give you one free, a taste you won’t forget…”

His long, expressive hands would reach out and caress some of the fruits in the basket. He would feel each one until his right hand came upon a particularly voluptuous fig, one whose body appeared as if it were ready to burst out of its purple coat. He raised it up to me, and smiled.

“Say tiine, my habibi, for tiine is what we call fig in the Old Country…”

He had placed his pocket knife next to the basket on the table in front of us, but rather than slicing the fruit he would simply press his two thumbs into the skin on the top of the purplish-black fig and give a little push. It would immediately pop open, revealing hundreds of creamy golden and pink strands of sugary flesh attached to pale seeds.

“See all the Fig beoble inside?” he would ask me, pointing to the seeds and softly chuckling. “It’s like what we show you how to make with your hands when you go to Sunday School: See the church, see the steeble, oben the doors, and see all the beople!”

I peered into the fig, and atop each of the hundreds of sinuous, glistening strands there was a seed that looked like a little boy’s head. Together, they looked like hundreds of little boys leaning, pushing to get onto a bus and out of the rain.”

While Papa held the fig in his right hand, he cradled my head with his left and gently tipped it back. “Close your eyes, habibi. Let me give you a taste of Heaven. Close your eyes…”

I did as I was told—sort of—squinting with my left eye so that I could see for sure what Papa was going to plop into my mouth. With his index finger and thumb he slowly moved half of the fig toward my lips. I opened my mouth wide like that of a baby bird, and my tongue darted out to lick the arriving fig. Some of the pulp smeared against my lips and my nose, and it seemed as though I were absorbing the fresh and cool flesh through my own skin.

Papa was right: the tender fig was so heartbreakingly sweet and rich with flavor that I sucked its pulp into my mouth and happily imbibed it, not quite sure if it was liquid or solid.
“Now you know why I almost cry at the end of the day when I come back to you and the truck is still full. These ‘Mericanyi, they don’t know what they are missing! The tender fruit is the better fruit, but they call it sboiled!”

I saw his eyes tearing up so I nodded, but the flavor of the fresh fig still overwhelmed my senses, pervading the zone all around my mouth and nose.

“Habibi, my dear little Gary Baul, your Baba make a wish for you: that you never say no to tender fruit. For your Baba’s sake, don’t ever become like the ‘Mericanyi who don’t know the good fruit from the bad fruit. Now what do you say, stick ‘em up?”

“Stick ‘em up, Papa!”

While I sit at a table fifty years later, remembering Papa’s words, I glance at a bowl of fully ripened fruit in front of me. The ceramic bowl is decorated with images of olives and artichokes, but in it are two of my favorite dessert fruits: Mission figs, and the prickly pear cactus fruits that are known to some as Indian figs. They are so ripe they are leaking purple juices into the bottom of the bowl.
As I stare out the window at the dry land in which I now live, I spot one of the spiny heaps of prickly pear pads in the yard; its pads are pointing and poking every which way, as if they are counterbalanced against one another to keep standing above the parched earth.

I remember that at the same house where Papa would place the figs and peaches and apricots on our kitchen table, we had a sandy backyard where a scraggly little prickly pear patch once grew. I stayed away from its stickers, but loved to see its yellow flowers. I don’t ever remember Papa telling me its name in either Arabic or his broken English, but I’m sure he remembered that there were also some kinds of prickly pear planted back in his Middle Eastern homelands. They had originally come to Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria from the Americas, roughly three centuries before he left the Middle East to make America his home.

As I turn from the window and look back at the fruit in the bowl before me on the table, I am amazed that I have never before noticed just how much the fruits of the prickly pear cactus actually look like the fruits of the Mission fig. They are nearly the same length, width, and volume, although the particular prickly pear fruit I have before me is a bit more tapered and less pudgy than the fig. The skin of the Mission fig is purple with little golden striations running up its sides like rays. The prickly pear fruits are purple as well, but their skin is punctuated every now and then by a cluster of miniscule stickers known as glochids that are also golden in hue. The scar of former attachment—where the fruit was situated on the mother plant—is blunt but lined with more golden stickers on the prickly pear. When you pull the short stem off a fig, its scar of attachment leaks a milky sap. In terms of shape, however, their scars are not all that far apart.

But that is about where their botanical similarities end. The fig, of course, is really a receptacle for hundreds of hidden flowers pollinated by some very allegiant fig wasp. The prickly pear tuna, as it is called in Spanish, is a fruit not unlike a giant rose hip, and its top is a scar from a dazzling flower that once attracted dozens of different kinds of bees. Both have juicy, succulent fresh that can be sun-dried, then

Above: A domesticated prickly pear in the desert oasis of Santa Gertrudis, Baja California. Photograph by Gary Paul Nabhan © 2010.
Africa stumbled upon the prickly pear fruits of Mexico and Turkey. Ancient sun-dried figs, just like sun-dried prickly Negro became the first Arabic-speaking Moslem to arrive Levant to northern Africa to Andalusian Spain, and then to the Caribbean and Mexico with the Spanish: tiine, tiin, teyn, tueh, tina.

In the caves not far from the Rio Grande, the remains of two kinds of edible plants begin to appear in the feces of hunter-gatherers about eight to nine thousand years ago. The two desert-adapted plants—prickly pear cactus and mescal, the succulent century plant—were apparently eaten and perhaps vegetatively propagated long before the first corn or beans were sown down below the caves, along the sinuous floodplain of the river that now forms the border between the United States and Mexico. By the time Estevanico el Negro became the first Arabic-speaking Moslem to arrive in the Desert Southwest, he found hundreds of nomads he called the Fig People congregating in the cactus patches of South Texas, where giant prickly pear trees produced enough fruit to nourish them for weeks on end.

Around the same time, figs begin to show up in Middle Eastern ruins; in fact, they too were staple foods for desert dwellers long before the broadcasting and full domestication of wheat, barley, chickpeas, and lentils. Like the first cultivated prickly pears, the first cultivated figs were simply propagated by transplanting cuttings pruned off older trees when the rainy season came to Persia, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey. Ancient sun-dried figs, just like sun-dried prickly pears, have been sporadically found in caves where they were cached for later eating, and seeds found in human scat testify that the eating did indeed occur. Willow baskets full of figs were left in the Egyptian tombs of Pharaohs, so that those legendary figures could take the esteemed fruits along with them on their journey into the next life.

And journey the figs did, to a New World where only diminutive wild figs occurred along the faces of cliffs overlooking the sea, or perched high on the cuestas of mile-deep barrancas. Likewise, the prickly pear set out for distant shores, appearing naturalized along the arid coastlines of the Mediterranean within a half century after Cristobal Colón carried it back from the so-called Mundo Nuevo to Lisbon in 1493.

Within just a few decades the Indian fig prickly pear and its succulent sidekick, the century plant, were fixtures in just about every arid stretch of the Mediterranean, from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Aegean Sea. In 1768 Linnaeus named two varieties Cactus opuntia—the spiny plant originating from Opus, Greece—and Cactus ficus-indica—the Indian fig cactus. Later, the scientific name for both of these forms became Opuntia ficus-indica, but many Europeans and Africans assumed it had come from the East Indies through Turkey. Like other crops (corn, tobacco, sunflowers, and squash) introduced from America through the Mediterranean trade routes of Moors, Arabs, and Sephardic Jews, it became a fig associated with the Turks—figo turoe.

Soon, the prickly pear became so ubiquitous and so abundant in the Middle East that some desert tribes claimed it had been there since the beginning. Curiously, the nickname now used for a Jew native-born in Israel is sabra, the term for prickly pears and their fruits. They are said to be desert-hardy folk with a prickly exterior but a tender heart. And, apparently, some believe that cacti were present at the death of the Son of God, who had become a desert dweller. In films such as The Last Temptation of Christ the prickly pear hanging from the stone walls of the Temple is flowering, just as Yeshua of Nazareth is hung from the Cross. Like the Mother of God, some prickly pears need not be fertilized by their kind to reproduce: Italian Catholics entranced by the Immaculate Conception called them fichi della Madonna.

What has always struck me as curious is that when the fig and the prickly pear changed places and partners, they sometimes swapped names. The prickly pear, not just in Italian but in several other Old World languages as well, became some kind of fig: an Indian fig, Madonna's fig, the Turk's fig, or the Asian fig. And the Old World fig, when it reached what are now known as the Desert Borderlands of North America, was taken to be a succulent, tree-like kin of the cactus. In the O'odham language of the Desert Borderlands, the fruits of the fig are called suuna, derived from tina. It appears that when the term tuna arrived with the Spanish, missionaries immediately applied it to the domesticated prickly pears that they brought from Central Mexico to transplant in the Sonora-Arizona borderlands around 1650. At least among the Desert People, truly wild prickly pears were still referred to by ancient native terms such as i'ibhai. But by 1710, a sloughed-off version of tuna—or one with the s attached as an intensifier—became applied to Old World figs as well: s-suuna. In any case, figs
and prickly pears came to be regarded as cousins, even though they are derived from different plant families, as well as from different continents.

Down where I live near the Mexican border, the surest way to find an old homestead from a previous century is to look for an old fig tree, at least one old spineless prickly pear, and a patch of horehound, the Old World mint famous for its use in cough drops. It seems that fig trees outlast the families that plant them; extractive economies like mining, logging, and quarrying can go belly up, families can come and go, but the figs they leave behind somehow find a way to thrive.

Most of them are Mission figs first planted in Arizona who know how long ago; others are Smyrna figs that originally came from the Aegean coast of Turkey, where Sephardic Jews, Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, and Turks first took their cuttings and planted them as they moved to other lands. A few Smyrna figs still grow around the rubble left from the razing of Smyrna in the struggle between Turkish and Armenian troops in 1922, and several still stand among the ruins of the ancient acropolis of Ephesus. Of course, in the American desert most of those that survive had been planted near springs and are soaking their toes down in some underground aquifer. The tenacity of fig trees outdistances political and social movements and defies probability statistics, for they continue to bear fruit even when other native and exotic trees have dried up and crashed to the stony ground.

The first time I visited my grandfather’s village in Lebanon, my second cousin took me up the ridge edging the Beqaa Valley to show me a sheep pasture that had belonged to my grandmother Julia. On the edge of the pasture near a rock wall was an old fig tree where shepherds would sit in the shade while they watched their flock.

“This tree,” my cousin explained to me, “was no doubt alive when your grandfather and grandmother were engaged to be married. Ferhat may have sat under it, or picked the tiine from it to give to your grandmother to dry in the sun. We say dried figs produce good dreams.” He winked and added, “A Lebanese man will always want his wife-to-be to dream wonderful dreams. In May, we say that when the fig leaves are the size of a raven’s claw, it is time to plant chickpeas in the garden. In June, we say that any fog which comes will cook the figs into a stew. In October and November, we say farewell to the last figs on the tree, and we begin to prune the branches for the next year. My grandparents told me that the figs mark the year for us with signs. They speak to us. It’s in the Bible too: the Phoenicians and Canaanites who lived in Lebanon centuries ago said the fig trees could speak. Perhaps this old fig tree spoke to your grandfather or to your grandmother.”

I closed my eyes and tried to remember the face of my grandfather, Papa John Ferhat Nabhan, a face I had not seen in some fifty years. I pledged aloud—although it was probably not heard by anyone among the living—that I would make some room at home for the fig and for the prickly pear, and offer my neighbors the most tender of their fruit.

And then I walked right up to one of those cacti and poked my index finger into its side.

“Stick ‘em up!” I shouted.

And it did.