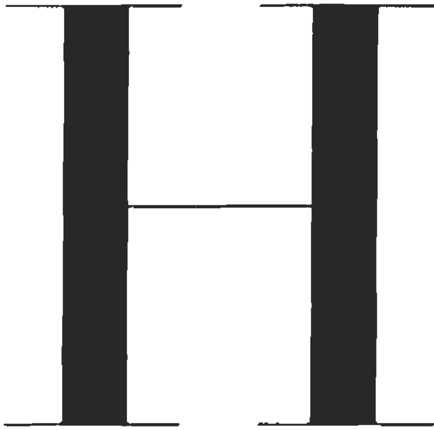

ere is something many of us do not know about citrus: It is a winter fruit.

That is not because we still charmingly and mostly incorrectly look to it to ward off or shorten the stay of wintertime coughs and sneezes. It is because nearly every variety of orange or grapefruit or lemon or lime ripens at the year's end.

"Citrus is fully ripe when the days are shortest, when the sun is at its lowest point in the sky," explains Eric Christensen, whose Rising C Ranches in California's San Joaquin Valley sell an incredible variety to Nobu, Momofuku, and wd-50 in New York, and Quince, Cotogna, the Slanted Door, and Chez Panisse in the Bay Area—restaurants that worry as fastidiously over the raw perfection of their ingredients as over what to do with them.

"The trees bloom between late March and mid-April," Eric tells me. "Fruit sets in early May. In June, the temperature rises to 100, and trees shed some fruit." What's left on the tree matures, and becomes fragrant and swollen and ready to be picked and peeled by December.

"Citrus that is eaten ripe, off the tree, has beautiful contrast you can't get in fruits picked out of season and ripened in rooms. It tastes alive," Eric says. "The fruits retain acid through their sweetness. It's a delicate acidity, but it's there."

Citrus was once the very symbol of winter-festival foods. Saint Nicholas left oranges in the toes of Christmas stockings; clementines, also called "Christmas oranges," graced holiday sideboards.

Today, we import the fruit from South America, Australia, New Zealand, in spring and summer and fall; we pick our own early and ripen them in gas-filled rooms. The orange has become such a workaday thing, shuffled into and out of grocery bins and stocked by the gallon as juice, that, in attempts to guard it from a Florida blight, scientists have proposed amending its genes with, alternately, those of spinach, a virus, and a pig.

As anything becomes common, it sheds poetry—but the orange had glorious beginnings. In ancient myth the goldeu apples of the garden nymphs, the Hesperides, which held the elixir of youth, were actually oranges. (Their being called "apples" is due to the Greeks' and Romans' proclivity for naming every fruit some sort of apple.) In Reuaissance Europe a château was not a château and a palace not a palace if grounds did not support an orangerie—an ornate greenhouse for indoor groves of oranges. According to the Marquis de Lescure, Marie Antoinette was so maniacally protective of her orange crop, sequestered in her orangerie at the Trianon, that she commanded gardeners to be on "constant guard, like the dragons of the gardeus of the Hesperides, during blossom time."

The fruit's variety itself is poetic. John McPhee's 1967 book *Oranges* counts 25 billion oranges grown in our sandy soil each year. They include "Maltese Ovals, Pope Summers, Nonpareils, Rubys, Sanford Bloods, Early Oblongs, Magnum Bonums, St. Michaels, Mediterranean Sweets, Lamb Summers, Lue Gim Gongs, Drake Stars, Whites, Whittakers, Weldons, Starks, Osceolas, Majorcas, Homosassas, Enterprises, Arcadias, Circassians, Centennials, Fosters, Dillars, Bessies, and Boones."

I will add satsumas, sanguinellos, kishus, Cara Caras, and Nordmann Seedless Nagamis. If I include lemons and grapefruits and citrons and miscellaneous others grown here and abroad, there are Meyers, variegated pinks, yuzus, Keys, Persians, bergamots, kumquats, etrogs, Buddha's Hands, melogolds, oroblancos, pomelos, Big Wongs, and a variety of grapefruit no one knows the name of but fellow cooks and I used to call "Lil' Yell-ers."

There are more than 1,000 varieties being grown at the University of California Riverside's Citrus Variety Collection, one of the world's most diverse. Tracy Kahn, the collection's curator, assures me that this is merely a fraction of existing citrus cultivars.

Other than amateur and professional pomologists—anyone engaged in the science of growing fruit—those most conscious of the season and kaleidoscopic variety of citrus are chefs.

"I think I fell in love the first time I had kishus from Ojai," says Michael Tusk of Quince and Cotogna in San Francisco, referring to tiny, perfect, sweet, seedless mandarins. "I don't approach winter citrus with preconceptions about whether it will be a first course or dessert. I taste it and determine where it's going to sit on the menu."

He goes on: "I always think of oranges and chicories together, the sweet and acidic versus the bitter. Cocktails are a great way to use citrus. I think of oranges and meats, too. Spit-roasted duck served tableside, with a citrus sauce."

A home cook might start, simply, with a bowl of warm, mild green olives, like Sicilian Castelvetranos, marinated overnight with bay leaves and thin segments of orange and olive oil infused with coriander and chili. A clean accompaniment is a citrusy cocktail called a soixante quinze, which is champagne, gin, lemon juice, and sugar syrup, infused with the peels of a Meyer lemon or grapefruit.

Here you could pause for a few oysters—orange season is also oyster season—with just wedges of lemons as accessories. But you might also do what I only recently discovered you could—search for finger limes, which are oddly purple, and look like horribly gorged caterpillars, but come full of tiny pebbles of tart, aromatic juice, which you can scoop out and pile on each oyster like citrus caviar.

Then, a salad of the best and brightest oranges and grapefruits available—most recently Cara Cara oranges, Moro blood oranges, navel oranges, and Minneola tangelos. Remove their peels and bitter pith with a sharp knife, then slice them in rounds and lay them, overlapping, on a plate, with vinegary slices of red onion, toasted pistachios, and then a sprinkle of Maldon salt and chili pepper. Douse it all heavily with strong Sicilian olive oil.

A fine and familiar main course is duck. We've all heard of duck à l'orange, though few of us these days (perhaps for the better) have tasted it. Duck—fatty and warming—is a good cold-weather food. Just as old and perfect a match is fresh citrus and anything from the ocean. See Titian's *Last Supper*. In it, Jesus and the disciples dine on oranges and fish.

I like poaching halibut in water or olive oil I've helped along with white wine, lemon, parsley, a clove of garlic, and a few fennel fronds, then perching the snow-white fish, rather arrestingly I think, atop blood-orange salsa, made of segments of the fruit, toasted pine nuts, tiny capers, thin slices of shallot, parsley, and olive oil.

The ubiquity of citrus in diet books tells a truth worth remembering: It is a light food. The great Charlestonian journalist and famed pig roaster Jack Hitt was at my table when I last served my halibut. The portions of fruit and fish, which appeared natural before my other guests, cowered before Jack. My boyfriend reported that for the duration of the meal, the Southerner looked prepared to eat his plate, and consumed a whole baguette before a feverish hunger faded from his cheeks.

In Asia and Europe, varieties of orange were originally chosen simply for the most aromatic peels. Sichuan cooking has relied on dried orange peel as one of its foremost spices for thousands of years. Marmalade is still made with the peel of the bitter Seville; candied citron and lemon peels are a holiday treat all over Western Europe. Sicilians remove peel in strips and dry them in sunny windows to extend the citrus-seasoning season through spring. The peel of the lemon preserved in salt and spices is a Moroccan stalwart.

It always makes sense to remove zest or peel from at least a few of your oranges for citrusifying anything you make in coming weeks. At the very least, you can keep yourself in soixante quinzes until the gin runs out.

Executive chef Michael Anthony of Gramercy Tavern recommends using every last bit of citrus to make whatever else you have more delicious. He described a dish to me, along the lines of Titian's fish and citrus, that uses only the zest of three citrus fruits to cure a whole two-pound fish overnight, which he then serves, thinly sliced, as an hors d'oeuvre.

If you dislike baking, the height of a fruit season is the season for you. Do what Tusk does at Quince, what Alice Waters does at Chez Panisse, and Sicilians do in Sicily, and serve the best and sweetest citrus raw, for dessert.

Citrus season is also especially good for the baking-tentative. There are orange and lemon cakes made with olive oil, which are nearly impossible for even a novice baker to mess up---and there are delicious puddings of nothing but sweetened yogurt or custard, topped with sugar-syrup-soaked fruit.

I have had good luck with a cake made by cooking orange segments, peel and all, in sugar, then smashing them to a pulp, mixing them with eggs, sugar, a little flour, and olive oil, baking the mixture in a shallow cake pan, and garnishing it with flaky sea salt. If you have a giant at your table and have chosen to follow the lean menu I have outlined above, put the cake close to him. He will eat half of it, but he will leave happy.

There are a few good ways to end all this, and one great one. You could steep the leaves of a kaffir lime, alone or with fresh mint, in boiled water, for a citrusy tisane. This is a bit Eastern and a bit monastic, but a fine note on which to conclude. For something fiercer, any good amaro—a bitter Italian liqueur of dark spices and roots and citrus peels—garnished with a sliver of orange peel will serve.

What you really want is something you can't have. Cruelly, one of the most delicious things to be made from citrus is a home-infused liqueur, light, translucent, bitter, and sweet -all at once—which must be made at the height of the season, among the shortest days, but can't be drunk for at the very least a month and a half, ideally many more.

There are several. One is L'Elisir d'Amore, named after an opera buffa by Donizetti in which an elixir guarantees the ardor of anyone whose lips it touches. It is made from tangerines and peels, sugar, vanilla, and aquavit. Another is Sicilian mandarinetto: thin-skinned mandarin oranges and sugar, combined in grain alcohol. My favorite is vin d'orange, a Provençal infusion that uses bitter Seville oranges but can just as successfully be made from a combination of oranges and lemons.

I suggest enlisting your guests' help; one can slice oranges, another lemons. Another can open vodka, another wine, another measure sugar, while you dig around your refrigerator for the lone vanilla bean that always languishes there. Everyone can combine their work in a big, clear glass urn, and weigh all the fruit down, and seal it, and together wedge it into a dark corner for the time being.

And wait. □

"CITRUS EATEN RIPE, OFF THE TREE, HAS BEAUTIFUL CONTRAST YOU CAN'T GET IN FRUITS PICKED OUT OF SEASON AND RIPENED IN ROOMS," SAYS GROWER ERIC CHRISTENSEN. "IT TASTES ALIVE"

**VIN D'ORANGE**

This version is made with a combination of plain oranges and lemons (a more traditional vin d'orange contains bitter Sevilles, which can be hard to find). It may be halved for a smaller batch, but I recommend making it all.

2 bottles dry white wine, like Muscadet
1 cup vodka
1 cup sugar
½ to 1 vanilla bean, split lengthwise
1 cinnamon stick
4 large navel oranges, quartered
2 lemons, quartered
Tools: large glass jar with lid

Combine everything in the large glass jar. Weigh the fruit down with a bowl or glass that fits snugly inside the jar. Seal, and put somewhere cool and dark, rotating the jar occasionally, for a month to five weeks. Strain the vin d'orange through a fine sieve or cheesecloth, pour into wine or liqueur bottles or Mason jars, and refrigerate for up to a year.

FOR A RECIPE FROM GRAMERCY TAVERN'S MICHAEL ANTHONY, DOWNLOAD THE *VOGUE* DIGITAL EDITION