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Home > Lifestyle News > Food News > Article > Love apples Why this lesser known juicy summer fruit deserves more attention than it gets

Love apples: Why this lesser-known juicy summer fruit deserves more attention than it gets

Premium

The summer brings with it a variety of fruits in the market and while mangoes and watermelons steal the show, the humble love apples available in light green and red colours are hardly looked at. Delving into its popularity, mid-day.com speaks to Mumbaikars, chefs and nutritionists why more people should enjoy the fruit till the season lasts



The love apple is a summer fruit that is juicy and mildly sweet and usually eaten plain but can be used to make many different kinds of dishes. Photo Courtesy: Kadambari Lobo/Araiya Hotels & Resorts

Mouthful of juicy, sweet and crunchy bits, 'love apples' or water apples as they are most popularly known are one of the most underrated fruits during the summer. The lesser-known fruit, unfortunately, often gets lost in translation as people confuse them with apples due to the homonym. However, there is a lot more to the fruit than just being called 'love apples' or 'jaams' colloquially in Mumbai. The fruits are usually available in light green, red or pink colours and are extremely juicy and refreshing due to its high amount of water content. They are often eaten plain, as most people including this writer remember gorging on them while growing up in Mumbai. While not everybody had the luxury of the tree, many afternoons were spent plucking them off the trees from neighbour's gardens, only to be chased by them while managing to balance the spoils in your T-shirt that acted as a makeshift basket. But beyond those summer days, why isn't the fruit as popular as mangoes during this time of the year?

Every year, Indians boast of mangoes and the many dishes that are made by every community around the country. While they are sweet and savoury and delicious, they manage to always take the spotlight as watermelons and other fruits also find their way on the menu. However, there is not much mentioned about the humble yet brightly coloured love apples or water apples as they are more popularly known in different parts of the city and country. In fact, this writer has hardly seen them on menus of the city. Even if they are there, they aren't boasted about like the royal yellow fruit but there are still Mumbaikars who make the most of them as soon as they appear in their gardens.

Making smoothies and wine in Mumbai

Growing up in Mumbai, Jean Dsouza remembers spending her childhood enjoying the fruits to the fullest. She reminisces, "It is a tropical summer fruit that is grown in practically every fifth village home. During my teenage years, we would climb this slender tree carefully and pick the fruits without dropping them." The Mumbaikar who now lives in Borivali grew up in Uttan and visits the northern village often after retirement now and gets a bountiful produce of love apples every year. In fact, she is one of many Mumbaikars who make the most of the fruit during this season as they not only eat it plain but do much more with it.

For starters, the 58-year-old baker who loves to cook says she takes it a step further. She shares, "Besides freshly cutting and serving them, I also use them while making a smoothie. Following the method that is used for any fruit or grape wine, I also use them to make wine by fermenting them first and then extracting wine out of it." While she hasn't been able to make the wine this year, the Borivali-based baker says she is definitely going to make a batch of it next May to enjoy at home.

Interestingly, this writer hasn't seen the fruit being used widely across restaurant menus in the city, especially since the wave of curating seasonal menus from fruits and vegetables took more than a decade ago if not more. While mangoes often find themselves on the menus in different sweet and savoury dishes, and even standalone menus, the love apples are hardly seen but Dsouza suspects that is because of one reason only. "This is a seasonal fruit. However, the shelf life is day or two because after that they get soft. It is also why their usage in restaurants may be limited because storage is not advisable as love apples lose their firmness and taste."

Beyond the gardens and into restaurants

MasterChef Mohammed Shahnawaz at ITC Grand Central in Parel agrees with Dsouza as he says the perishability factor may often be a deterrent for chefs to make use of the fruit in their dishes. Apart from its low shelf life, the consistency in quality of the fruit may also discourage chefs as that often depends on how and where the fruit is grown. It is no wonder then when the Mumbai chef says the team uses love apples to make something as simple as a delicious smoothie along with bananas, spinach, Greek yogurt, honey, and almond milk. He explains, "Love apples provide a refreshing, hydrated base with a mild sweetness that complements the other fruits and greens, creating a healthful and delightful smoothie." Apart from its mild sweetness, Shahnawaz says the fruit has a floral taste that brings out a refreshing flavour in the dish.

At the city-based five-star property, the Mumbai chef says they prepare love apple-infused dishes on a request basis only and not frequently, and that is evidently due to the lack of awareness. "The response from diners has been very positive. Many guests are intrigued by this less common fruit and appreciate the unique texture and flavour it brings to our dishes. They often comment on the refreshing quality of love apples and enjoy discovering new and innovative ways to enjoy them," adds the chef, who believes that the fruit hasn't been used to its full potential yet in the city and India.

Till then, lovers of the fruit can find happiness that it is at least appearing on some menus in the city and is being used in different ways. Elsewhere, Arun Kumar, executive chef at Araiya Hotels and Resorts Palampur in the hills also makes use of love apples in a variety of ways. He shares, "Love apples sustain for a very short time with freshness intact, so we preserve it in a number of forms like jams, dehydrated slices for garnishes, blanched wedges deseeded for later use, its puree form for making cordials or accompaniment for love apple-flavoured beverages."

As most people using it may boast of the use of ripe love apples for their crunchy texture and sweetness, Kumar there exists a world beyond that. "The unripe green apple characteristically possesses a characteristically astringent flavour and hence is ideal for use in the preparations of pickles, curries and chutneys. Few of the other applications in food are love apple decadence, which is a water apple semifreddo made during summers and Dovie popsicles that are simply frozen puree of ripe love apples in stencils," he adds.

The very thought of love apples or rose apples, as he likes to call them, bring back sweet memories for Kumar from the first time he experimented with them. He shares, "I was serving as a junior sous chef when I tried this magical ingredient for the first time for making treacle tarts with candied rose apple, after the meal. Diners were pleasantly surprised by the unique flavour profile of rose apples, which offers a delicate sweetness with floral undertones. This surprise quickly turned into delight as they savour the refreshing taste and crisp texture of the fruit."

However, he believes that the fruit may be even lesser known to chefs because it is only grown in the tropical regions and the culinary experts may not know the taste often making them ignore the fruit for other popular fruits like berries, melons and stone fruit. A certain inability on how to select, prepare, and incorporate them into dishes may lead them to be hesitant but once these are addressed, it will encourage experimentation and creativity in the kitchen. Interestingly, he has observed that there is a growing interest for unique and exotic fruits and the water apples aren't far away from being explored not only for their culinary uses but also their added health benefits.

Breaking down its health benefits

The latter is true because there is more to love apples than what meets the eye. Garima Dev Verman, certified nutritionist with The Healthy Indian Project (THIP), which is a health literacy platform, says there are many health benefits that you can derive from the fruit, especially during summer. To put it simply, she explains, "Incorporating Love apples into your summer diet can provide a refreshing, nutritious boost while helping you stay hydrated and healthy."