

Pomegranate

One of today's super foods - so-called because it is high in Vitamins C and K and anti-oxidants - the Pomegranate has an ancient lineage.

It appears in old-master pictures such as Botticelli's *The Madonna of the Pomegranate*, as a symbol of fecundity. It usually finds a place in a cornucopia or horn of plenty. In art it is often shown bursting open invitingly to reveal its multitude of scarlet seeds. Some say that it was the tree from which Eve picked her 'apple or *pomme*' that led to the fall of man from the Garden of Eden. It is often found as a decorative feature in architecture. The Pomegranate is sacred to many ancient belief systems from Zoroastrianism to Islam.

Today, it has two principal uses: as a juice to drink pure or better paired with apple, mango or orange to counter the astringent aftertaste. The seeds are used to decorate and flavour dishes, especially salads. It is found in recipes from the Levant, Persia and Arabia where it grows abundantly both cultivated and in the wild. Chefs from those regions, like Ottolenghi, often use the fruit in their recipes. Dieticians extol its many health-giving properties.

In spring, the bell shaped, orange-coloured blossom looks decorative against the light green leaves. The shape of the plant, usually a small to medium sized tree or bush, looks especially fine in terracotta pots on a terrace. The large globular, red fruits ripen in late autumn just as other fruits are becoming scarce.

The pomegranate is endemic to the southern Mediterranean and may have been introduced into Europe by the Romans from Carthage hence its Latin name, *Punica granatum*. It may have arrived in England from Spain when Catherine of Aragon married Henry VIII. The pomegranate was her badge. She fell from royal

favour but her fruit found a lasting place on the British table as much for decoration as for its acrid sweetness.

I always found fresh pomegranate a bore to prepare; the seeds cling obstinately to the yellow honeycomb of bitter pith that is high in tannins. I learnt from a chef that cutting the fruit in half and bashing the round side repeatedly with a heavy wooden spoon - excellent for getting rid of aggression - easily dislodges the seeds. Supermarkets now sell the juicy seeds ready prepared, it takes away all the fun.

Pomegranate juice makes an excellent sauce *vinaigrette*. The seeds can be used to make an unusual and decorative salad when paired with fennel, bulgar wheat and tender young broad beans.

It is found in many Eastern recipes that include chicken or lamb and as part of deserts containing yoghurt and honey.

Scatter the seeds with gay abandon on pretty much any oriental dish, salad or desert and your guests will think you clever and creative and at one with the zeitgeist.

Capers

If people think about them at all, most people assume that a Caper is a fruit; it can be but then it becomes a Caper Berry, the larger one with the fruit-like stalk and the seeds inside.

The usual caper is small and either preserved in salt or in vinegar – these are the flower buds of the plant.