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HOT DATES : Sampling the Fruits of the Desert

By KITTY MORSE

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INDIO — The winter harvest season is to me one of the most picturesque times of year to visit the Coachella Valley. Gone is the intense summer heat and its lingering desert haze, replaced instead by balmy breezes and brilliant blue skies. Palms laden with the year's date crop stand at attention across the desert like rows of green feather dusters on parade. I walk among the towering trees listening to the breezes move through the fronds, while the sun's rays play a symphony of gold on the heavy bunches of ripe fruit.

I like to observe the painstaking harvesting process--one that still relies on the skill of experienced hands. In many Coachella Valley groves, this is the job of pickers, or palmeros, who climb up the trees and attach themselves to the trunk with a heavy chain laced through their picking belts. Wielding a machete, the palmero slices off a bunch of ripe dates and lowers it, attached to a large metal hook, to a partner waiting below. Clouds of dust engulf the earth-bound workers as they manually shake the dates loose into a large bin. As the harvesting trucks purr their way through the grove, tree limbs stripped of dates remain scattered on the ground like skeletal bouquets.

Indeed, palm trees and date-bearing palms especially, have always had special meaning for me. When I was growing up in Casablanca, my parents sometimes took my brother and me to spend a weekend in Marrakech, a historic town in southern Morocco. To this day when I visit, I plan my arrival for sunset, when the town's graceful, ocher-colored minarets emerge like beacons from the 3,000-acre grove of date palms encircling it. During the fall harvest season, vendors sit in the shadow of the graceful, towering trees, hawking bunches of freshly picked dates to passers-by.

Much the same atmosphere prevails throughout the Coachella Valley that cradles Indio and the appropriately named town of Mecca, where dozens of varieties of dates can be purchased at roadside stands. And it is there that I like to explore not just the expansive groves themselves (the area produces 95% of all the dates consumed nationally), but what there is to eat.



Recently, my husband and I spent the day cruising through the valley from Cabazon southeast to Indio and on to Thermal. We meandered through the ritzy desert outposts of Rancho Mirage and Indian Wells to the older, more modest farm communities of Thermal and Coachella, tracing an L-shaped itinerary of about 50 miles through the heart of California's date country.

Next weekend is a good time to explore, as well as to eat, when the National Date Festival at the Riverside County Fairgrounds in Indio (Feb. 18-27) presents a plethora of events, including camel races, costumed vendors and a date cook-off.

In the Coachella Valley, the date of choice is the semi-soft, amber-colored Deglet Noor (or "date of light" in Arabic), sold nationally as the California date. It accounts for 95% of the harvest here, but it is accompanied by the sweet and soft, caramel-like Halawy (which means sweet), its cousin the Khadrawy (green) and, finally, the small and golden, semi-soft Zahidi (nobility). To me these all present unique and separate opportunities for eating and cooking and the perfect excuse for a drive.

While dates are mainly thought of in the United States as a kind of exotic snack, they are an integral part of the cultural lore of North Africa and the Middle East. There, tradition dictates that a platter piled high with the sweetest and plumpest dates--usually Medjools--accompanied by a glass of milk, be offered to guests as a sign of welcome. In Morocco, they also enter in the preparation of a wide variety of sweet and even savory tajines, or exotic stews. Thoughts of these familiar specialties were dancing in my mind as I drove past the landmark forest of eerie windmills marking the approach to the Coachella Valley that signaled the first stop in my quest for California dates at their source: Hadley Fruit Orchards in Cabazon.

For many travelers, Hadley's provides the introduction to locally grown dates, including Medjools and the soft, dark amber Barhee, in addition to the more common varieties. Sampling is encouraged and, in my case, lead to the purchase of sticky date coconut rolls (\$2.99 for 12 ounces), diminutive date nuggets (\$1.99 a pound) and a coarse, caramel-colored date sugar, among other date-based products. Hadley's banana date shake, rich and smooth and very sweet, was hearty enough to sustain this urban nomad and a companion for several hours (large, \$2.40; small, \$2.20). Those who want to take home a taste of the California desert can order one of Hadley's lovely gift packs.

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Leaving Hadley's and driving east on Interstate 10 and then southeast on California 111, I found my way to Shields Date Gardens in Indio, which is perched on the edge of 111--a road sometimes referred to as "The Date Highway." For decades, Shields has enticed visitors to its vintage '50s gift shop and adjoining theater with a continuous showing of "The Romance and Sex Life of a Date." The show--many of the slides now scratched and yellowed with age--is narrated by the late E. Floyd Shields, a pioneer date producer. Seated inside the darkened theater, viewers learn that the landmark establishment was started in 1924, when pioneer date grower Shields began experimenting with dates from Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Morocco.

Following this short expose on date horticulture, I slipped out of the theater and headed straight for the ice cream counter to sample Shields' trademark Black Date ice cream cone (\$1)--an unctuous blend of vanilla ice cream generously laced with date puree. Informative descriptions lured me to the glass display case filled with packages of Brunettes and Blondes (\$2.25 a pound), cans of Medjools (\$17 for a three-pound can) and golden date crystals (\$5.50 for 1 1/2 pounds), among other products. Abdullah the mechanized camel grinned at me as I left the cavernous store clutching a package of deliciously chewy Blondes that I eventually snacked on like peanuts.

On Monroe Street, off California 111 in Indio, Dates By DaVall occupies 15 acres. DaVall is a small operation that prides itself on growing dates organically.

Standing by the small counter, visitors can sample their syrupy-sweet ripe Honey dates (\$14.40 for 2 1/2 pounds, including shipping), and buttery, caramel-hued Empress (\$15.15 for 2 1/2 pounds, including shipping), also available by mail order.

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A few miles east down 52nd Avenue in Coachella, north a block or two on Harrison and at the intersection of Harrison Street and Baghdad Avenue, Charlotte Anderson Stocks and her sister, Catherine Kerby, own and operate the Covalda Date Co.

Much of the original equipment remains at the company headquarters in the Covalda Packing House, a cavernous building constructed in 1919. If you drop in, a smiling Stocks, who zips around the warehouse in an electric cart, may guide you through the sorting and packing operations.

Covalda's products include chopped dates (\$1.75 a pound) and, naturally, dehydrated date chips (\$15.80 for a five-pound sack)--a product created by her mother, Stocks said--date almond confections (\$2.67 a pound) and crunchy date pecan logs (\$4.40 a pound). Covalda's smooth-as-silk date shake is made with reduced-calorie ice milk in an effort to trim the caloric content (\$2.25 and \$1.50). All of Covalda's date specialties, except for the shakes, are also sold by mail order.

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A short detour west, on California 86, imposing groves of palm trees and fields of artichokes paint a green swath all the way to Valerie Jean Date Garden in Thermal. The open-air date stand, with an adjoining packing house, occupies the tip of the sweet potato patch that its founder Russ Nicholl, who is generally credited with inventing the date shake, once tended. The farm stand was opened in 1928 and has since expanded to include a bakery and a packing house.

Valerie Jean's appears as if not much has changed since the '20s, except, perhaps, for the constant hum of traffic zooming past and the steady stream of customers stocking up on prepackaged dates and tubs of gooey date butter spread (\$3.25)--great on toast or as a frosting for a simple butter cake, and an essential ingredient in Valerie Jean's thick, soul-satisfying date shakes. Gift packs sold in the store or by mail order include date cakes (\$2.50) and cookies, as well as date assortments (\$20.50 for 15 pounds).

Back on California 111 is another mandatory stop for date lovers: Oasis Date Gardens in Thermal. A welcome patch of emerald green lawn welcomes picnickers around tables scattered under the cool cathedral of palms. There is no more picturesque place in the valley to sample California dates at their source, nor can I think of a better location to sample the thick and chewy date pie (\$1 a slice), or sinfully rich, oversize chocolate-covered jumbo Medjool date (\$1 each), or a velvety-smooth and honey-sweet date shake made with yogurt or soft ice cream (\$2 each).

Inspired by the area's Sahara-like climate, owner Ben Laflin's father homesteaded the land in 1912. At first he planted seedlings, but seedlings rarely adopt the parent tree's characteristics. Offshoots of existing trees were required, and for that, Medjools were imported from Morocco. The original nine trees eventually multiplied into 5,000, creating one of the largest commercial Medjool groves in the United States. Each step in Oasis Garden's production, from the individual picking of ripe Medjools to the careful packing process, is done by hand. The Laflins produce the Barhee date and sell it in the "khalal" or hard, yellow stage (a style of date that is highly prized by some aficionados); the dry and chewy Thoori or "bread date," the Halawy, which is ideal for shipping, the mahogany Khadrawy, one of the first dates to ripen in the valley, and the less common black Abada dates. Oasis Date Gardens products are sold year-round here and also by mail order.

Across the street, the pony-tailed Jim Dunn of Great Date in the Morning runs a mail-order-only date business.

Picking off a few moist Barhees, Dunn reflects on the path that brought him from Berkeley to this corner of the valley. A college friend with connections in the desert first introduced him to the area, he said. For several years after that, he hauled organic produce and dates from the Coachella to Santa Cruz County in his 1946 Chevy flatbed truck. He eventually settled in the Coachella Valley permanently, and now owns more than 50 acres of certified, organically grown date palms. In a departure from the norm, Dunn is among a handful of growers who freezes his dates instead of fumigating them before sending them to market or, in his case, by mail order. (Barhees cost \$3.25 a pound for a two-pound bag; Khadrawys, \$2.45 a pound for a two-pound bag).

Standing in the palm grove, sampling a few of Dunn's ripe Barhee dates right off the tree seemed a fitting conclusion to my excursion into the California desert. Satiated in body and spirit, I was ready to head home laden with several pounds of fresh Barhees, Medjools and Deglet Noors. At this moment, the Marrakech palm grove felt only a heartbeat away.

GUIDEBOOK

Date in the Desert

Getting there: From Los Angeles, head east on Interstate 10 to Cabazon, continuing east on 10, then south on California 111 to Thermal.

Where to buy: Dates by DaVall, 50-725 Monroe St., Indio 92201; tel. (619) 342-3406.

Great Date in the Morning (mail order only), P.O. Box 31, Coachella 92236; tel. (619) 398-6171.

Hadley Fruit Orchards, 48190 Seminole Drive, Cabazon 92230; tel. (800) 854-5655 or (909) 849-5255.

Covalda Date Co., 51-392 Harrison St., Coachella 92236; tel. (619) 398-3551.

Oasis Date Gardens, 59-111 Highway 111, Thermal 92274; tel. (800) 827-8017 or (619) 399-5665.

Shields Date Gardens, 80-225 Highway 111, Indio 92201; tel. (619) 347-0996.

Valerie Jean Date Garden, 66021 Highway 86, Thermal 92274; tel. (800) 828-5657.

For more information: Contact 1994 National Date Festival, Riverside County Fairgrounds, Feb. 18-27; tel. (619) 863-8247.

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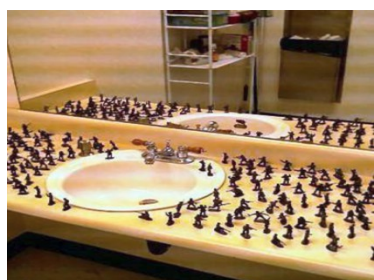
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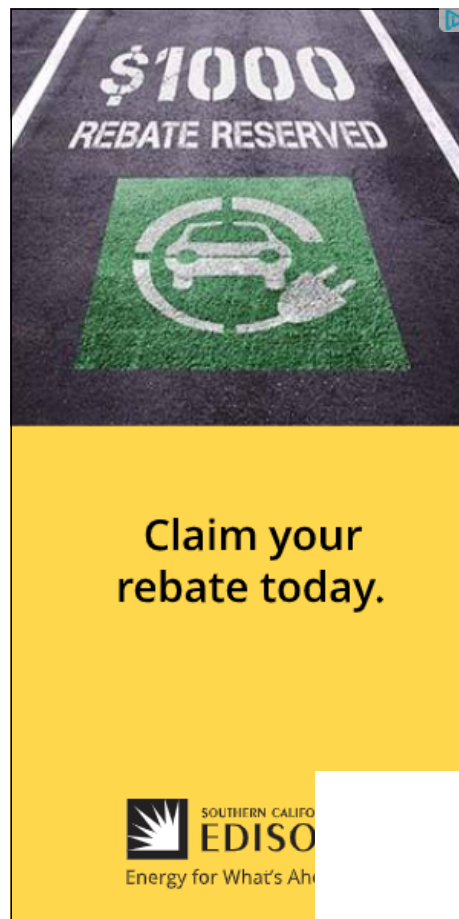
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