

# The Frenzy Over Indian Mangoes

Continued from Page One for Indian, Phanase said.

"Mango sells itself," said Bhaskar Savani, who has been importing Indian mangoes since the day a U.S. ban was lifted and the first fruit arrived in 2007. "It's the fruit of God."

Walk into any American grocery store and the mango on offer is almost certainly from Mexico. At around \$10 a box, it's affordable and available year-round. But Indian mango devotees swear it's essentially a different fruit.

"South American mango basically screwed up the mango," says Savani. "It tastes like a raw potato."

Indian mango—Alphonso from Maharashtra's Ratnagiri coast, Kesar from Gujarat, Chausa and Langra from the north, Banganapalli from the south—is richer, sweeter and

fiercely seasonal.

It's priced accordingly. A box, usually holding 10-12 mangoes, runs \$50 to \$60 this season. That's up from \$40 to \$45 last year, a jump importers attribute largely to tariff uncertainty and rising airfreight costs due to the Iran war.

India produces more than 20 million metric tons of the fruit annually, roughly half the world's supply, during the 12-week peak spring season. Yet for decades, the fruit was locked out of the U.S. market.

The mangoes were banned because of a practical problem: the hot-water treatment used to clear pests from South American fruit before it entered the U.S. destroyed the more delicate Indian varieties.

A solution existed—gamma radiation, the same technique used on onions to keep them from sprouting—but getting it approved took years. A strong South American agriculture lobby didn't make it any easier.

Savani, a dentist with no background in trade policy, craved the sweet fruit of his childhood after immigrating to the U.S. When his father was caught bringing a mango



India produces roughly half the world's supply of mangoes each year, and U.S. shipments of the rich, sweet fruit go quickly.

into the country, Savani thought there had to be a better way. He spent the early 2000s reading old congressional bills. He even visited a nuclear research facility in India to learn more about the irradiation process. He and others eventually convinced officials on both sides to raise the issue at the highest levels.

In 2006, President George W. Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh agreed

to work toward lifting the ban. When Bush tasted a mango during his visit to India, he reportedly told Singh, "This is a hell of a fruit!"—a line importers still love to repeat.

Nearly two decades later, the fruit maintains a recurring cameo in U.S.-India diplomacy. But getting the mangoes into the U.S. is still an ordeal.

The fruit, after being harvested, must be irradiated at one of a handful of certified

government facilities in India, inspected by a U.S. Agriculture Department officer stationed there, loaded onto passenger jets and cleared by U.S. Customs and Border Protection before being placed in customers' hands—hopefully all within about seven days, which is roughly how long the fruit stays at peak ripeness.

Margins hover around 10%. But a single bad day anywhere in that chain can mean tens of thousands of dollars lost in rotten produce. "The fruit will behave how it wants to behave," said Jaidev Sharma, a Chicago-based importer. "You can pay top dollar and get fruit that spoils on arrival."

Phanase once absorbed a \$40,000 loss when USDA inspectors ordered an entire shipment destroyed on the spot after paperwork didn't match up.

In south India, there is exactly one irradiation center, in Bengaluru, creating a bottleneck every spring. Cargo space is an eternal constraint. Most fruit travels in the bellies of passenger jets, competing with pharmaceuticals and electronics. This year the Iran war has

complicated things further, with the first shipments delayed or canceled and batches spoiling because of fewer flights and higher oil prices.

None of this has dampened demand. Multiple importers said they have spoken with Costco about a trial run—though executives reportedly noted that, at five times the price of a regular mango, the Indian variety costs as much as the retailer's well-known lobster tails. Other importers said they are in talks with Walmart. Costco didn't respond to a request for comment. Walmart declined to comment.

Preorders for this season sold out before the first mango left India in April. For the truly devoted, Sharma's company ZZ Mango now offers a mango season pass—a weekly box delivered to your door for the duration of the season for those willing to fork out close to \$1,000.

The most surprising thing about the orders has been who's actually buying. "Our most loyal customers are Americans," said Sharma. Indian expats, he said, tend to complain about the price.