



Text, LOUISE QUICK

SWEET HISTORY

From using its leaves for matting and its fruit as daily sustenance, the date palm – or ‘tree of life’ – is rooted deep in the rich history of the Arabian Peninsula



While nowadays most of us have traded in our palm leaf bedding, dates are still being eaten more than ever. In fact, dates are big business and the UAE alone cultivates 750,000 tons of the sweet fruit every year, making it the fourth largest producer globally – behind Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The date is believed to be the world’s oldest cultivated fruit, with a history stretching back to 4,000 BC in what is modern-day Iraq. However, its popularity has spread far beyond the Middle East and records show that the world harvests more than six million tons every year. As early as the 17th century dates were enjoyed by British nobility as an exotic luxury.

While the fruit has been a day-to-day snack in the Middle East for thousands of years, certain dates go for a much higher price than others. Some are heralded for their sweetness, others their ideal farming conditions and a few because they are stuffed with nuts and dipped in chocolate to make a luxurious treat.

One high status date is the Medjool. Naturally large and soft, its dark mahogany skin reveals a deliciously sweet fruit, almost caramel in taste. Originally from Morocco, these in-demand dates are now grown worldwide, as far away as California, which explains its nickname the ‘Californian Date’ and, due to its popularity in the US, the ‘Cadillac of Dates’.

Their size and international popularity mean Medjool dates are also some of the most expensive,

clocking in at a local price of approximately Dh 100-120 per kilogram. They’re also regularly lauded for their nutritional benefits, as they’re packed with natural sugars, energy and nutrition.

“At around 80 per cent sugar when ripe, dates are among the sweetest fruits of all,” explains Lovely Ranganath, Senior Nutritionist at Dubai World Trade Centre. “Dates in general are a great source of fibre and contain significant amounts of calcium, magnesium, iron and potassium.”

Each variety of date is distinct and while Medjool dates are valued for their size and sweetness others, such as Ajwa dates, are revered for something deeper.

As Mosaab Abdo, Group Exhibition Manager for Abu Dhabi Date Palm Exhibition, says, “Some dates are popular because of their specific tastes, while others have historical, religious and spiritual value.”

Often found on sale for as much as Dh 250 per kilogram, Ajwa dates are known to Muslims as a ‘holy date’. They have dark brown-black skin dotted with fine white lines, a sweet prune-like fruit and, more importantly, are recorded as being first cultivated and favoured by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Date palms and Islam are intrinsically linked, with its fruit mentioned several times in the Quran. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was a keen believer in their nutritional and cleansing benefits – he encouraged those fasting during Ramadan to begin each Iftar with a date and water for purification. It was the Ajwa date, however, that was his favourite and he claimed eating seven each

morning could protect against poison.

Not only are they desired for their heritage, but Ajwa dates are in limited supply. As the gourmet date company Bateel tells us, only those dates grown in Madinah in Saudi Arabia are truly Ajwa dates.

Another popular variety is the Deglet Noor, or ‘Queen of all Dates’. Like Medjool dates, these are in high demand worldwide and are widely farmed in California. Originally from Algeria, these dates are semi-soft, amber in colour with a sweet nutty taste and often used in cooking – from desserts to savoury stews.

The UAE has its own plentiful array of dates. The most highly regarded is the Khalas, which is farmed in the Al Ain and Al Dhafra regions of Abu Dhabi and sells for approximately Dh 40 per kilogram. With golden-brown flesh and a delicate toffee-like flavour, these local sweet treats are often served alongside Arabic coffee and, as such, are popular with Emiratis.

Other popular dates cultivated in the Emirates include the small and sweet Dabbas, meaning ‘honey date’ in Arabic, and the Fard, which are round, very sweet and favoured in the UAE and Oman.

There are hundreds of varieties of dates, farmed around the world and each valued on distinct factors. Find the more expensive fruits is easy, but finding the best boils down to personal preference and, fortunately, requires plenty of taste testing ●



↑ Medjool dates were originally grown in Morocco exclusively for royalty, and are now grown worldwide, as far away as California.

↖ The maturing Algerian Deglet Noor dates, commonly referred to as the ‘Queen of all Dates’.

← A labourer busy segregating dry dates at the market. It will then be filled into gunny sacks and sold or exported.

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