

the pits

NEWSLETTER

Jan. - Feb 1999

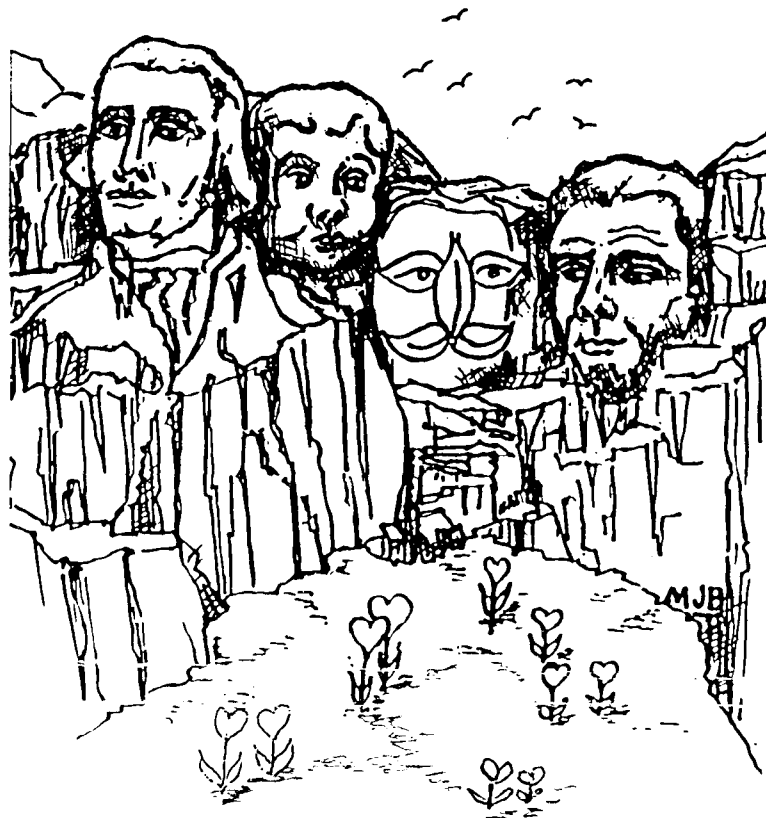
Volume 21 #2

WHAT'S IN THE MARKET

Arrowroot, Black Sapote, Buddhags hand, Carambola, Cherimoya, Carob, Date, Feijoa, Fig, Kumquat, Kiwi, Lemon grass, Malanga, Mamey sapote, Mango, Name, Papaya, Passion fruit, Pomegranate, Persimmon, Prickly pear, Tamarillo, Tomatillo, Taro, and Water Chestnut.

SEEDS

This month, Bob Jurgens is offering Purple datura courtesy of Duane Campbell, Pomegranate seeds of DSP's *P. granatum* 'Mr. Wonderful' and Cardoons. If you are interested send, \$1.00 per packet and an SASE to: Bob Jurgens, 116-32 227th St., Cambria Heights, NY 11411. Checks should be made payable to the Rare Pit and Plant Council. These seeds are large so be sure to send a **sturdy envelope**.



APOLOGY

"**Note:** We are having a lot of trouble with the mail. If you haven't received a newsletter recently (August) please write us."

Dr. John wrote this for the August newsletter and it was meant to be a joke. Unfortunately, because of reasons of health, Marty Biesc was unable to put the newsletter together until October. **There was no August newsletter** - it became the Sept. - Oct. Newsletter. We sincerely apologize and promise to a. get the newsletter out on time and b. proof read every line 5 times over.

New England Spring Flower Show: 'Artistry in the Garden' Mar. 13-21, 1999, Bayside Exposition Center, Boston, MA. There will not be a special Pit Exhibit or class as we used to have at the New York Show, but we are encouraging our local 'Pit Growers' to enter in special classes. If you have any 'Pits' grown from seed or cuttings, please contact me: Debbie Peterson at the Scituate address and I will send you the necessary forms. This is a marvelous show and it would be wonderful if we could have a special exhibit in another year.

Note: December 21 was the first day of spring for our houseplants. It is time to wake them up and start regular watering and feeding. Search around the house for all those dormant bulbs you've forgotten and pot them up.

The Rare Pit & Plant Council

17 Circuit Ave. Scituate, MA 02066



CORNUCOPIA II *A Source Book of Edible Plants*

Stephen Facciola
Kampong Press, Vista CA
713 pg. \$45.00

When writing this newsletter, there are four books I always have beside the computer,

Fruits of Warm Climates, by Julia Morton for general descriptions and culture, Food by Root for trivia, The Oxford Book of Plants, for esoteric plants and Cornucopia for absolutely up-to-date, accurate information on nomenclature, uses, and sources.

Cornucopia is not an easy read. 1,500 species are discussed and all their cultivars, too numerous to count. Each description includes, origin, uses, a coded bibliography and coded sources. Here is the information on the Blue agave:

“Agave tequilana - Tequila agave. Cultivated in Tequila, Jalisco for the production of the alcoholic beverages mezcal and tequila, which are distilled from the roasted bases of the plants..... (He then describes the 4 types as in Marilyn’s article.....Tequila is the principal ingredient, along with the orange liqueur ‘Cointreau’, of the classic cocktail known as ‘Margarita. In contemporary cuisine it is added to salsas, marinades....etc. Agave nectar, a concentrated syrup made from the sap, is becoming popular with home brewers as an adjunct, especially for tequila-flavored meads. Mexico cultivated. (The discussion is then followed by coded

information. “Hutson 1995, Novel, Uphof” (These names refer to the bibliography that refers specifically to agave and can be looked up in the bibliography. “A79M, F65{PD}, F73D {S}, G94” (These refer to sources for either plants, seeds or supplies).

The appendices are a favorite place to browse. Appendix A: Usage and Edible Parts.

Here the author lists all the plants used to ferment alcohol, or baking powder substitutes, or sugar substitutes. Appendix B: Species Native to or Naturalized in North America and Appendix C: Species Not Listed in Kunkel (We profess ignorance about Mr. Kunkel and his work.)

The index in the original Cornucopia was divided into Genera, Common names, and very difficult to use. There is one index and it is easy, both botanic and common names are listed together as well as specific subjects such as tequila. You can look up a plant by botanic name, common name or use.

The introduction is by Alan Davidson, the editor of the Oxford Book of Plants. “Of the 4,500 books with which I have worked, there are just 21 which sit in a special little bookcase beside the computer, ready to be consulted at any moment. Of the 21 none has been consulted more often (thousands of times, not just hundreds) than Cornucopia.”

Cornucopia is an extremely important book and a must for every serious food and garden writer. Spend a few hours getting to know it, and you’ll never be without it.

To purchase a copy, send \$45.00 to
Kampong Publications, 1870 Sunrise Dr.
Vista, CA 920084

TEQUILA

by Marilyn Shapiro

Tequila, the world's most complex spirit, uses its raw ingredient the blue agave or *Agave tequilana 'Azul'*, found in the Mexican state of Jalisco, 30 miles west of Guadalajara, Tequila country extends from the Pacific coast of Mexico to the central highlands. To be Tequila, this beverage must be made of 100% blue agave. The blue agave is a rather primitive looking succulent that grows in the volcanic soil of this region. The plants grow to about 5 feet in height and take 9-10 years to mature. So the agave farmer must be able to predict what the market will be 10 years ahead in order to plant the "right" size crop.

Fine tequila is an earthy, subtly sweet, spicy spirit. The beverage is distilled from the juice of the fine grained core of only the blue agave. It is meant to be sipped and savored. There are nearly 100 different labels. The finest tequila is made to be sipped in a brandy snifter not in a mixed drink. The world's most famous tequila is Cuervo Gold (Jose Cuervo's *Cuervo Especial*). This tequila is tainted with caramel and is not 100% blue agave.

Tequila was first mentioned in the writings of the Spanish monks in 1621. Prior to that, the Aztecs knew that they could hack off the leaves of the blue agave and expose the core. They would press the core and get a mildly alcoholic beverage. *Pulque* was a milky fermented home made drink similar to Tequila. The Spanish took this process one step further. They had learned how to distill alcohol from the Arabs who invented distillation; they introduced it into Mexico in the 16th century.

The agave crop is harvested by field hands called *jimaladores* who select the plants to harvest by color. Thus they are harvesting the 'ripe' plants all year round. Harvesting is done by using a *coa*, a

handmade razor sharp blade attached to a stick. The jimador slashes off the leaves to expose the core which is called the *pina* and can weigh between 20 to 100 pounds. The *pina*,



the starchy white core, is cooked for at least one day in a brick or concrete oven with a capacity of 50 tons. At *La Rojena*, a hacienda-like Cuervo distillery, founded over 200 years ago, *horneros* (workers) carry heavy pinas that have been split in half on their heads to the ovens (*hornos*). After the pinas are cooked, they turn amber and take on a soft texture and have a candy-like sweetness that resembles ginger and citrus. They are then crushed. The juice, called *aquamiel* or honey water, is separated from the pulp, fermented and then distilled in copper *alembics* (Pot still). Tequila is often distilled at 110 proof or 55% alcohol and then diluted with water.

After distillation, the spirit is made into one of four types of tequila:

Silver: Sometimes referred to as blanco (white) is unaged, clear tequila. This is preferred by some because it has the most straight forward agave flavor, earthy with nuances of citrus, sweetness and spice. This beverage is made of 100% blue agave, sipped straight up as vodka or on the rocks with a splash lime. Mexicans, also, mix this with a lemon-lime soda called Suqite in 'Tequila Country.'

Gold: This is unaged tequila tainted with caramel and used in mixed drinks.

Reposado or rested tequila: This straw colored distillate, by Mexican law is aged from 2-12 months, is mellower than silver. Some prefer it in cocktails because of its more relaxed taste.

Anejo or aged tequila: This beverage used for sipping after dinner, is aged in wooden barrels for more than one year. The color varies from gold to amber. The taste is tinged with vanilla and is reminiscent of Cognac or Armagnac.

Any of these four types of tequila can be made of 100% blue agave. Mexican law permits as much as 49% sugar can be added.

To enjoy the famous 'Tequila' ritual, you lick the notch between your thumb and

index finger, put salt on that area. Then you lick the salt, drink the shot and suck on a slice of lime. (The Mexicans prefer to suck on a lemon.)

By now the question of the *'worm' comes to mind. None of the tequilas have the worm. There is a beverage similar to tequila called **Mezcal** that is made from agave but not the blue agave. The flavor is more rustic, often aggressive with a smokey taste. Mezcal has the worm.

The following is from Beth Weissman Try it, your arteries will love it!

Margarita Party Pie

- | | |
|--|---------------------------|
| 1 1/2 cups crushed pretzels | 1/4 cup tequila |
| 1/4 cup white sugar | 4 tablespoons Triple Sec |
| 2/3 cup butter or margarine, melted | 1 cup frozen strawberries |
| 1 can (14 oz) sweetened condensed milk | 2 cups whipped cream |
| 1/4 cup lime juice | Red food coloring |

1. Mixed crushed pretzels, margarine and sugar. Press into the bottom of a 9" pie pan and coat sides.
2. In a bowl mix tequila, Triple Sec, condensed milk and lime. Pour half of the mixture into another bowl.
- 3 Add strawberries and a few drops of red food coloring into one bowl. Fold in one cup of whipped cream.
4. To the other half, add one cup of whipped cream.
5. Spoon into crust, alternating colors. Freeze 4 hours or overnight.

Marilyn's article piqued our interest. What did she mean about "the worm" After inspecting our liquor cabinet to see if there were any worms in our tequila (there weren't) I went on-line. The following quote is from:
<http://www.mezcal.com/worms.html>

This graphic is followed by several angry pages printed in 30 pt font. The implication being, that the worm in the bottle, is a result poor sanitation by a young, inexperienced, bottling entrepreneur in Mexico City.

I suspect he, and his worms are laughing all the way to the bank.

In 25 years we have never met a palenquero who has offered a sip of his mezcal with: A worm, A lime or Salt. In our experience the only use of the worm besides a marketing gimmick is to mask the chemical taste of poorly produced mezcal.

The true history of the worm in the bottle



BOOK REVIEW

Physicians Desk Reference

for Herbal Medicines.

Medical Economics, Montvale N.J. 1998,
pp 1244, \$ 59.95.

Readers of the Pits Newsletter are well aware that Dr. John is a proponent of traditional scientifically based medicine and an implacable foe of the notion that "natural" is the same as good or safe. However, there is a rising interest in the use of herbal products to treat humans and even if you think that most herbal remedies are

ineffective or even possibly harmful, knowledge of their effects may be critical. For example certain herbs may increase or decrease the effectiveness of prescription drugs.

Part of the rise in interest in herbal medicines stems from the fact that the dietary supplement industry is no longer under the supervision of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that applies rigorous standards of safety and efficacy to medications

prescribed by your doctor. Dietary supplements, and this includes herbal preparations, are under no such scrutiny and although they are not supposed to make medical claims word of mouth and slick packaging frequently circumvents this regulation. Historically, of course, most of our prescription drugs are derived from natural products such as Penicillin mold, Digitalis (Foxglove) and Quinine (Cinchona bark). It stands to reason that some of those herbal preparations may have undiscovered benefits.

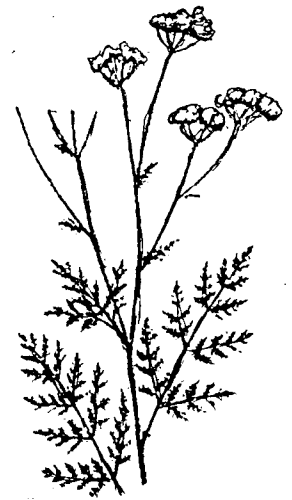
Much of the information is this

volume is based on the German Regulatory Authority or "Commission E" that provides the best scientifically based information on the uses of herbal products. Literature references are provided in detail for each herbal product are frequently from the German literature

The body of the text is catalogued by botanic name and common names, a description of the plant, its actions and pharmacology of the plant or its parts if this varies. Indication and usage as judged by Commission E are listed and unsubstantiated uses are listed separately. Contraindications, precautions and adverse reactions are noted and dosage and over dosage noted. This is an area for special caution since herbal preparations are extremely variable in concentration depending upon the method of preparation.

Excellent color photographs of many of the plants are provided in a separate section. There are several useful lists. Indications for specific illness are listed with established uses separated from controversial ones. Lists of therapeutic categories such as analgesics or antitussives are noted. A third list includes side effects such a liver damage or insomnia and finally a most important list of drug/herb interactions. For example: individuals taking *Rauwolfia serpentina* should be aware that they may suffer severe bradycardia (slowing of heart beat) if they are also taking digitalis glycosides. The list of drug/herb interactions must be considered tentative since this an area of medical thinking that is undergoing rapid evolution and expansion.

Finally there is a short glossary of horticultural terms. Ending the volume is the location of each states Poison Control Center with 800 numbers. This alone might



Hemlock

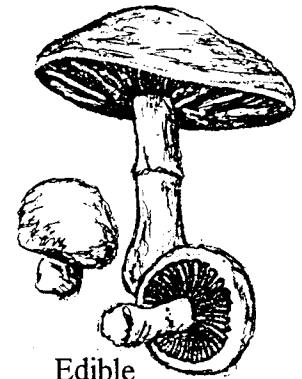


Foxglove

be worth the price of the book.

I am not sure that I buy all the recommendations of Commission E. I have seen too many medications survive the rigorous FDA scrutiny only to disappear after a brief period of enthusiasm. Just remember natural only says it comes from

nature which gives us Amanita phalloides, the Death Angel and sundry other toxins. And you can get too much of a good thing. You can die from Digitalis poisoning.
John Hart M.D.



Edible
Mushroom

The following recipe has been sent to us by our Spanish member, Tish Ortega. It is from her Moroccan cookbook. Sounds delicious.

CARDOONS

4 or 5 Bunches of cardoons

3 lbs. meat (lamb or beef) cut into small pieces or ground.

1 small glass of oil

4 onions sliced

4 cloves of garlic chopped

1/2 tsp salt

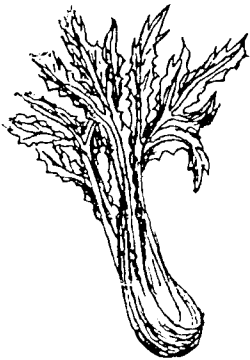
1 tsp ginger

1 tsp saffron*

3 pints of water

Carefully remove the strings of cardoons from the ribbed sides and membranes from the smooth side. Cut them into 2" pieces and drop them immediately into water with lemon juice. **This is very important and do not skip.** Lemon juice prevents them from discoloring. All this can be done while the meat is cooking with the rest of the ingredients in the water. Cook meat in a 9 1/2" pan for one hour. After an hour take out the meat and cook the cardoons - add 1/2 glass of lemon juice to cardoons five minutes before they are cooked. Arrange the cardoons on a platter around the meat. (Unfortunately it does not tell you how long to cook the cardoons)

* If you don't have saffron handy, you can substitute Annatto seeds. These are available in most Supermarkets.



REMINDER: Late January and early February are ideal times to pick boughs for indoor forcing. Shrubs that will bloom in 6 weeks are good candidates: forsythia, benzoin, quince and apricot.

Enjoy the ornamentals of a winterscape. Take a walk in the woods and note the many berried trees and shrubs. Look for the flowers of skunk cabbage poking through the snow. On warm days, look for the flowers on witch hazel; these are fragrant ribbon-like and uncurl with the warmth and close up with the cold.

If a January thaw occurs, reapply antidesiccant to all evergreen shrubs.

Rhoda Dendron  Pete Moss

THE PLASTIC PALACE:



This year marked one of those horrid, bench-mark birthdays. Dr. John, to compensate for my woes, gave me a quonset hut style greenhouse. It is 24' long, 12' wide and 8' tall. It is made of sturdy arched, aluminum tubing, and covered with 6 mil plastic. The kit cost \$245.00; the door, \$72, from Home Depot, and the necessary wood \$64.00 - total \$381.00. The construction and the plastic covering were a gift from our good friend and nurseryman, Doug Litchfield of Hill Billy Acres. Doctor J. and I are mechanically challenged, and there is no way we could have built it without Doug.

It took Doug approximately 12 hours to construct. The arched tubing sets into 2-3' aluminum tubes that have to be dug (or banged) into the ground. This is the tricky part.

We have no heat, light or electricity. To increase the heat we lined the floor (ground) with heavy construction black plastic. (Also a gift from Doug) we have a brick path down the middle that absorbs heat (salvaged from a local demolition project), and shallow black trays filled with water that

give off heat as they freeze.

The one additional expense was an indoor-outdoor Min-Max thermometer. We take its temperature everyday and after 6 weeks have a pretty good idea of how it works. It's about 10° warmer than the outside. One night it got down to 4° outside it was 12° inside. Our average temperatures in this area (maritime zone 7a) range from 44° by day and 29° by night. The palace maintains itself at 55° by day and 39° by night. Spring will be a month early this year!

Right now we are forcing 100 plants for the New England Spring Flower Show. Our main concern is to force 40 *Prunus laurocerasus* 'Otto Luyken', dwarf cherry laurel into bloom. Normally this shrub would bloom in mid-April to early May. They are all budded up and we may have a problem holding them back.

Next year we plan to raise those trendy greens that make up "Italian salad mix" all winter. We may winter our half-hardy plants such as camellia, rosemary, and pomegranate

A plastic palace may not be for everyone, but if you can - they are simple, remarkably inexpensive for the work they do, and they add a whole new dimension to gardening.

Pit pursuits answers

1. What is the derivation common name Chaste Tree? And what is its Botanic name.

ANS. In medieval times monks ate the seeds of the Chaste tree to curb their lusts. The Botanic name is: *Vitex angus castus*.

2. To what plant does the biblical reference "The Rose of Sharon" ANS. The ancients were not much of botanists and loosely translated it means the flower that blooms on the plain of Sharon. The plant, a small tulip - *Tulipa montana*.

3. What is Iceland's second greatest export? ANS. Bananas. These are raised in the heat of the many hot springs that dot Iceland.

4. Translate: **POMA EDIMUS UT ARBOROUS CONSERAMUS** ANS "We eat the fruit to grow the tree.



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GONG XI FA CAI !



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