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# Meyer lemons for a twist on classic taste

by **MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO**  
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Taut-skinned, glossy, and a sunny shade of yellow-orange, Meyer lemons can make ordinary lemons look anemic in comparison. But whereas regular lemons can be had for about 50 or even 30 cents apiece, a Meyer will cost three times as much. Is the difference worth the price?

The answer depends on whether you want a traditional lemon or a different twist, for a Meyer is actually a hybrid believed to have resulted from a cross between a lemon and an orange or mandarin. Just pierce its tender skin with your fingernail, and you'll release a heavenly tangerine-like perfume.

"The fragrance is more complex. It's a softer, more palatable version of a lemon" said Joel Somerstein of Riviera Produce in Englewood, which supplies fresh produce to restaurants.

Like all citrus fruit, Meyer lemons originated in China. Their name refers to Frank Meyer, the U.S. Department of Agriculture plant researcher who introduced them to the United States in 1908. Long popular on the west coast, Meyer lemons are predominantly grown in California's Central Valley. "People in the restaurant community have been hip to them for a long time," said Somerstein.

Unlike standard lemons, Meyer lemons are not available year-round, however. "November to March is the general season. This year we did not get



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them until December. They're at the peak of their season right now," said Somerstein.

Still, shoppers have to be careful. Typically bursting with juice and sporting a skin that's much more delicate than that of most lemons, the Meyer is also much more perishable, so it's possible to spot rotting lemons behind a \$4 per pound price tag. Ideally, the fruit should be firm and dense. A richly colored orange-yellow rind indicates a Meyer that was picked fully ripe. Given its cost, "if you're smart, you'll use the entire thing," said Somerstein. And that's just what area restaurateurs do.

Ryan DePersio, the executive chef at Fascino in Montclair, recently tapped Meyer lemon juice for a seafood salad vinaigrette. His mother and the restaurant's pastry chef, Cynthia DePersio, plans to craft a parfait of Meyer lemon mousse with pears poached in Meyer lemon juice and zest, combined with white wine and sugar. "It's got a unique flavor. The skin has a different profile than standard lemon. It's not quite as acidic, so you can go a little lower on the sugar," she said. "Everybody's looking for something a little different. These things are not available year round. You want to have it when you can."

At Stone House at Stirling Ridge in Warren, chef Jerry Villa recently used Meyer lemon juice and rind to add what he called "background flavor" to a buttermilk pancake brunch special garnished with slices of the lemon accented with mint. The juice also can be put to good effect when combined with brandy and sugar to glaze a roast loin of pork, he noted. "The Meyer lemon has a slightly sweeter taste than your conventional lemon. It gives it a different twist," he said.

To stretch out Meyer lemon season, Villa preserves the fruit to dress grilled fish. He starts by boiling the lemons whole, then cutting them into quarters or eighths before sprinkling with kosher salt. Next, he places them into sterilized canning jars into which he pours additional Meyer lemon juice. After five days at room temperature, he transfers the jars to the refrigerator. When ready to serve, he drizzles extra-virgin olive oil over the lemons and brings them back to room temperature. The process, he said "intensifies the flavor."

At the Park Avenue Club in Florham Park, a private dining club owned by a foundation representing 11 charities, executive chef Arnold Kruck makes a Meyer lemon confit by jarring salted lemon wedges, which he allows to sit for about a month. "You want it to 'cook' in its own juices," he said. Then he drains the lemons, discards the flesh and reserves the rind. One application calls for sauteing his Meyer lemon confit with shallots to accompany scallops.

Kruck also likes to sprinkle Meyer lemon zest over seared fish and mix it into a blood orange and shaved fennel salad. "It just gives it that little 'wow' factor," he said. "It's a little different without going overboard on the sweetness," said Villa. "It's the best of both worlds."

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