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Now starring the persimmon

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco/For The Star-Ledger

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JUST IN

With ersatz Stars of Bethlehem twinkling on Christmas trees and Stars of David decorating Chanukah cards, it should come as no surprise to find a starburst etched into each horizontal slice of Sharon fruit. A type of persimmon from the Israeli plain of the same name, it reaches our shores just in time for the year-end holidays.



It is not the first persimmon of the season, however. Supermarkets have had persimmons in stock for a couple of months now, first from Chile and then from California, according to Joe Granata of RLB, a produce distributor in West Caldwell.

Shaped like a large acorn, the Hachiya persimmon was the first to arrive. Though the Hachiya softens to a delectably sweet and jelly-like tenderness -- best savored chilled and scooped out with a spoon -- its tannins make it unbearably astringent when not fully ripened. The squat Sharon fruit is a type of Fuyu persimmon. Resembling a tomato, the Fuyu remains firm even when ripe and is not astringent.

"Although it may be hard to find organically certified persimmons, it's usually not hard to find unsprayed persimmons, because this tree crop is not beset by many pests," noted Jeff Cox in "The Organic Food Shopper's Guide" (Wiley, 14.95).

Both Hachiyas and Fuyus, including the Sharon cultivar, are the kaki species of the Diospyros genus, which means "food of the gods." Indeed, in many parts of the world the fruit is simply known as the kaki. Native to China and belonging to the ebony family of trees, the persimmon spread to Japan and Korea, where it is popular during Lunar New Year festivities. Commodore Matthew C. Perry is credited with introducing the fruit to the United States in 1856. An American species, *Diospyros virginiana*, which Native Americans



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available.

Even though persimmons are a very good source of vitamin A and manganese and a good source of vitamin C, "it's not one of your big movers," said Granata. "Sales are probably half of what pomegranate sales would be. It's not touted for having health benefits like pomegranates."

"On an average night, we'll sell one or two cases," said Joel Somerstein, a buyer at Riviera Produce in Englewood, which supplies restaurants on both sides of the Hudson. "It's a difficult sell. Someone has to really want to work with them. More chefs seem to prefer the Fuyus."

Arnold Kruck, executive chef of the Park Avenue Club in Florham Park, is one of them. "The Hachiyas really have to ripen up, and once they're ripened you have to use them right then and there," he said.

Kruck concocts an eye-catching relish for roasted pork loin by combining Fuyu persimmons with dried cranberries. The same brilliantly colored relish could also accompany a cheese course, he said. Kruck also likes to pair diced Fuyu persimmons with thinly sliced Serrano ham and arugula dressed with lime juice.

When shopping for persimmons, "a nice bright orange color is what you want," said Granata. The exception is the Cinnamon, a yellow-orange Hachiya subvariety that Granata feels falls short of its hype.

"What you're looking for in the Hachiya is a little bit of give, not a lot of blemishes. Fuyus don't have to be as soft and ripe. They don't come as bright orange as the Hachiya, but you want a nice orange color to them," said Granata.

Persimmons should be left out at room temperature until ripe. A ripe Hachiya will look like a water balloon that's ready to burst. If the flesh within has turned from red-orange to reddish brown, however, it is past its prime. The fruit can be costly -- \$2 to \$3 apiece. "But they have a pretty decent shelf life, so that's helpful," said Kruck.

To get the most from your persimmons, he recommended letting them double as a holiday centerpiece as they ripen: Just set them out in an attractive bowl and let them shine.

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