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## The Real Forbidden Fruit

Though some will tell you the forbidden fruit was actually the physical body of the devil that Eve tasted, most scholars believe there was a literal Garden of Eden, and within, a literal forbidden fruit. But contrary to popular belief, the fruit was not an apple—in 1470 A.D., the popular painter Hugo Van Der Goes depicted an apple tree in the biblical Garden of Eden, and the image stuck. Apples have flair, certainly, and were a nice contrast to all that green, but it was the fruit of the fig tree that promised a God-like knowledge of good and evil, and the leaves of that tree that Eve sewed together to cover her newly-noticed nakedness.

The fig is deceptively alluring. It doesn't beg you to touch it or taste it. And its name does little to entice. Many fruits have monikers representative of their succulence and complexity—pomegranate, cassava, persimmon. And then there is the dowdy, matter of fact fig. But don't feel sorry for it yet: In Italian, fig is *il fico*, and the sweetest part of the female anatomy is *la fica*. The fig's history is like its form—a flower folded into itself, and it has many stories.

Long the symbol of female sexuality, figs abound in historical and mythological literature. One Greek myth credits Demeter as introducing the fig, or “fruit of autumn,” to

humans. Among the Hellenes, figs were linked to the libidinous god Dionysius, and to this day, the phallus carried at Dionysian festivals is carved of fig wood.

Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, were suckled by a she-wolf under a fig tree, which later, in the time of Pliny the Elder, was revered as sacred. Pliny called figs restorative and said, “they increase the strength of young people, preserve the elderly in better health, and make them look younger with fewer wrinkles.” The prophet Isaiah used figs as a treatment for boils, and found them helpful in curing stomachaches and sleeplessness. And the high alkalinity found in figs is said to be helpful to those quitting smoking.

It was sitting beneath a fig tree that Siddhartha Guatama had the revelations that formed the foundation of Buddhism. And Mohammed said, “If I should wish a fruit brought with me to paradise, it would be the fig.” Perhaps this is why Cleopatra had basket of figs with an asp hidden inside smuggled into her chamber after her lover Anthony’s suicide. Figs were her favorite, and only death by snakebite assured immortality. Unfortunately, this was very recently refuted by Professor Stanley Bernstein, who pointed out that Egyptian cobras are large, nasty snakes that don’t just calmly lie around in baskets, waiting to be called to service. Still, it will take many years for that image to fade from collective thought.

The fig most likely originated in the fertile part of southern Arabia, and over several centuries spread to Syria and the Mediterranean coast, reaching Crete by 1600 BC. The Greeks believed figs to be more precious than gold, and, with the Phoenicians, spread this appreciation throughout the Old World, though the cultivated fig industry

most likely began with the Mesopotamians living in the Tigris and Euphrates River Valleys over 10,000 years ago.

As early as 1520 figs were carried to the West Indies by the British, and fig trees were planted in South Carolina, Florida and Virginia in the late 1500s. In the 1700s missionaries planted figs from Baja California to San Jose, hence mission figs. The famous foodie Thomas Jefferson imported and cultivated figs after loving them in France, though many Americans and Britons didn't yet appreciate them. In 1821, William Cobbett, author of *The American Gardener*, found figs, "a mawkish thing at best." In 1835, Henry Orr, "the most experienced and fashionable waiter in Washington society" according to one of Jefferson's friends, declared figs "quite vulgar."

Was the fig, a symbol of fallen innocence and the sensual pleasures of paradise, simply too sexy for our Puritanical tastes? Apparently. It was made more wholesome by the bland and homogenous Fig Newton, developed in 1891 by Kennedy Biscuit Works, now Nabisco. Over a billion Fig Newtons are sold every year, but they lack the undeniable chutzpah of the fruit that witnessed the fall of man and the rise of empires. It took risk-taking chefs in restaurants like Chez Panisse and Babbo to restore this sacred fruit of the old World to its rightful pedestal. Now, on most menus, you can't avoid figs—and why would you want to?