

EU Bans Indian Mango Imports

Manish Mehta, Associated Press

MUMBAI, India (AP) — Indians are feasting on some of the world's most succulent mangoes after the European Union banned imports of the fruit from India this month, producing a glut and rock-bottom prices for local consumers.

Starting May 1, the EU banned imports of Indian mangoes including the Alphonso, considered the king of all the mango varieties grown in South Asia, because a large number of shipments were contaminated with fruit flies. The pests are considered a threat to crops grown in Europe.

"Those jittery Europeans have taken fright at some fruit flies in our mango exports, flies which they fear will wreak havoc on their tomatoes and cucumbers," the Times of India wrote in a gleeful editorial. "Imagine sacrificing the king of fruits for salad!"

For years, the Alphonso mangoes had been out of the reach of most Indians as the best of the fruit was shipped to the supermarkets of Europe and other parts of the world where it commanded a premium price.

In Mumbai, the capital of the main Alphonso growing region, the fruit is now selling for 150-550 rupees (\$2.50-\$9) a kilogram, about \$2-3 below prices last week. And sellers say they expect the prices to fall even further.

Mangoes start arriving in Indian markets in April, providing a juicy, delicious respite from summer temperatures and humidity as they start climbing to oppressive levels.

Piles of mangoes are cooled in refrigerators or buckets of ice-cold water or pureed to create refreshing drinks that cut through the scorching heat.

The Alphonso, with its golden yellow flesh and distinct aroma, is a favorite and is especially prized because the best varieties are either exported or prohibitively expensive.

This year, however, the stores in the crowded lanes of Mumbai's Crawford market are piled high with crates and baskets of perfectly ripe Alphonso.

Deepak Kanulkar and his family are now gorging on the delicious fruit.

"There is difference in the size and texture. The moment you touch it, you feel the difference. When you cut it, you get this aroma which fills the room. The taste is definitely superior," he said.

"I have had these mangoes while living abroad and now I am seeing the same quality here."

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But the EU ban is likely to disappoint legions of Indian mango fans in Britain, an EU member nation where the fruit has become popular not only in the substantial Indian community but also among foodies who look forward to the 10-week Alphonso mango season, said Jenny Linford, known for her London Food Chronicles blog.

She said the Alphonso mango has a unique texture, aroma and flavor unmatched by other varieties.

"They are valued and celebrated," she said.

She said mangoes found in British supermarkets are often dreadful, rock hard and with little flavor, while mangoes sold in smaller Indian markets are extremely tasty and less expensive.

"The ban has serious implications for Asian green grocers in London," she said.

Monica Bhandari, whose family business Fruity Fresh depends on the short Alphonso mango season, is petitioning the British government to overturn the ban. So far, however, the "e-petition" she has posted on the government website has not attracted enough electronic signatures to force a government review.

She said seasonal jobs will be lost because of the EU's refusal to consider a compromise, such as vapor heat treatment of all Indian mangoes before they are brought to Britain to assure they are pest free.

"We are frustrated," she said. "It's a short season. We can't afford to wait weeks and weeks for a response. We are told there'll be a debate in Parliament; I hope it happens."

Indian mango exporters are worried, as well. They say they may lose the hold they have over European markets. Alphonso mangos are sold from mid-April through June.

Exporters are likely to lose 500-600 million rupees (\$8-10 million) in business, according to Sanjay Pansare, a fruit exporter in Mumbai.

"The loss of money this season isn't our biggest fear. We are worried that we may lose the export market that the Alphonso mango has captured."

The Indian government is also trying to work out a way to have the ban revoked.

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