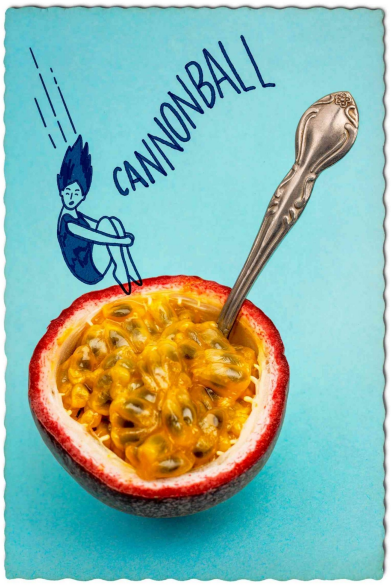
On and Off the Menu

A Passion-Fruit Devotee's Pilgrimage West

To follow the scent of passion fruit around Los Angeles is to discover some of the city's most inventive cooking.

By Hannah Goldfield



The inside of a passion fruit seems like something not meant to be seen: a geometrical, otherworldly cluster of small black seeds, each suspended in an orb of glossy, sunset-colored pulp.Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin

About a decade ago, a friend of mine and her husband moved from Brooklyn to Los Angeles. After landing at LAX, they went straight to Gjelina, a restaurant in Venice that exemplifies a certain image of life in Southern California: seasonal, sensual, wood-fired cooking; a sun-dappled patio near the beach. "We had this long, exquisite lunch," she recalled recently. "And just as we were getting ready to pay the bill, feeling like 'Wow, we're Californians now!,' something dropped out of the sky and landed in the middle of the table." A passion fruit had fallen from one of the vines overhead, and as they sat there staring at it in delight a waiter appeared. "Wordlessly," she said, "he cut the fruit into two hemispheres and handed each of us a tiny dessert spoon."

The story sounds like it was plucked out of a tourism campaign, or the depths of my subconscious. I first tried fresh passion fruit fifteen years ago, in Brazil, and in the years since it has captured my appetite and my imagination in equal measure. A passion fruit is as enclosed and mysterious as a hen's egg, though a common commercial variety called Frederick's looks like it was laid by a dragon: when it falls off the vine, its exterior is smooth, firm, and slightly speckled, the deep purple color of wine-stained lips. The shell is stiff and leathery, requiring a bit of sawing to open. What's inside seems almost not meant to be seen: a geometrical, otherworldly cluster of small black seeds (edible, delicate, and pleasingly crunchy), each suspended in an orb of glossy, sunset-colored pulp, surrounded by fragrant juice of the same golden hue, as obscenely slurpable as an oyster. I find the flavor, perhaps my single favorite, intoxicating. It's citrus-adjacent, but more complex: sweet, bright, savory, sour, and even a touch sulfuric. My husband, who loves it less than I do, has likened it to body odor.

After my trip to Brazil, I searched for fresh passion fruit obsessively in New York and rarely found it. When I did, it was often priced prohibitively high, as much as five dollars for a single piece. And then, about a year into the pandemic, I hit upon something enviable while scrolling through Instagram: a video of an influencer with a chicly appointed kitchen, unboxing a shipment of passion fruit. I learned that a company called Rincon Tropics, in California, would mail it across the country, quite affordably, if you were willing to purchase a minimum of five pounds. A few days after I placed my first order, a large U.S.P.S. box arrived, filled to the brim with fragrant purple globes, sturdy enough that they needed minimal cushioning. I piled them in a bowl to wrinkle—the more shrivelled they get, the sweeter—and worked my way through several a day.

A few weeks ago, I shook the hand of the man who grew them. Nick Brown, a slight, bearded thirty-two-year-old who wore a wide-brimmed hat atop a tuft of dark hair, met me at the bottom of a dusty road that led up to his family's ranch in Carpinteria, some seventy miles north of L.A., on a hillside with a glorious ocean view. As we bumped around the six-hundred-acre property in his Subaru, Brown, a sixth-generation farmer, pointed out groves of trees drooping with the weight of unripe avocados and scaly green cherimoya ("like a mango, a pineapple, and a banana all put together," he said), which his father commercialized in the U.S. more than forty years ago.

Around the same time, the family also planted passion-fruit vines, but found that there was no steady market for their yield. “At times, they couldn’t give it away,” Brown said. About six years ago, he decided to try again. He had noticed, as I have, a gradual infiltration of passion fruit—a mainstay of Latin American and Asian cuisines, and huge in Hawaii—into the broader American palate. It flavors big-brand seltzer, yogurt, and lip balm; I’ve seen it on the menu at trendy New York restaurants and in buzzy cookbooks such as “More Than Cake,” by the downtown-darling pastry chef Natasha Pickowicz, which includes recipes for jellied passion-fruit candies and passion-fruit olive-oil curd. Pickowicz told me recently that whenever she incorporated it into a menu item at Flora Bar, the Upper East Side restaurant where she worked until it closed, in 2020, “people would go crazy for it,” jumping to order the dessert based on that ingredient alone.

The passion fruit was a hit at the Santa Monica farmers’ market where Brown had a stand. In 2020, after he stopped driving down because of the pandemic, he began to ship it to a few of his regulars, some of whom happened to be influencers. Brown’s Instagram account, where he posts Edenic landscapes and still-lifes of halved fruit, gained a new crowd of admirers.

These days, he ships about a thousand pounds of passion fruit a week—roughly five thousand pieces—directly to consumers, and to restaurants. As we stood beside a thick hedge of vines, growing horizontally, he bent over to pick up fallen fruit, balancing half a dozen pieces in one hand, as if he were about to perform a juggling act. Instead, he carried them to a patio in the center of a sunny stretch of grass, rimmed by succulents and flowering rosemary bushes. “I didn’t bring spoons,” he said, as he sliced a few fruits open with a serrated knife, “but there’s hoses here where we can rinse off.” I squeezed half a shell in my palm to loosen the seeds and scraped them out with my teeth, juice running down my chin.

“We can’t grow enough,” Brown told me—in part because the weather has been unpredictable. Last spring, when he would have expected the vines to flower, ready to be pollinated by bees, a wet fog rolled in and didn’t lift for weeks. Once the crop had finally dried out, Brown still had to contend with another issue: deer. “They really love passion-fruit vines, but they’re kind of jerks about it,” he explained. “I have a video on my phone of a herd just