

JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

Fruits You Probably Haven't Heard of—but Might Soon

Will baobab, breadfruit, monk fruit and jackfruit take off in the U.S. like kale and quinoa? These entrepreneurs hope so

By Jaewon Kang

Oct. 9, 2019 7:06 pm ET

Exotic fruits are having a moment in the sun.

More consumers are embracing products containing breadfruit, monk fruit, baobab fruit and jackfruit, as food makers process their pulp into flour and sweet syrup and sell fruit powders that can be added to smoothies and other dishes. The purveyors of these fruits say they are capitalizing on demand from people looking to eat less meat and more plants, for their own health and the good of the environment.

Mike Lee, co-founder and co-chief executive of Alpha Food Labs, a New York-based company that helps food companies create and launch new products, thinks exotic fruits such as jackfruit could join kale and quinoa as once-obscure foods that are now common in American pantries.

“Once you implant the idea and the benefits of a certain ingredient in the psyche of American consumers...you can scale the supply chain fairly quickly,” says Mr. Lee, who previously worked at yogurt maker Chobani Inc.

It takes some creativity to get customers to embrace a fruit they don't recognize, and logistical acuity to get those wares from far-flung corners of the globe, says Luc Maes, the founder of Kaibae, a Santa Barbara, Calif. firm that sells powder and beauty products such as face oil made from the fruit of baobab trees, which grow in parts of Africa.

Kaibae provides baobab powder to manufacturers such as Nature's Path Foods, which mixes it into a cereal, and Patagonia Provisions Inc., which adds it to snack bars. Kaibae also sells baobab powder and beauty products directly to consumers through online sites such as Amazon.com Inc.



Baobab fruit PHOTO: MICHAEL HOEWELER

“Bringing a new ingredient to market requires a lot of education,” says Mr. Maes, a doctor of naturopathy who fell in love with baobab while researching plant-based medicines in Africa, where the fruit historically was used to thicken porridges and make candies. To help spread the word about baobab fruit, the various parts of which are said to be rich in vitamin C, calcium, potassium and other nutrients, Kaibae holds events, works with food incubators and has created a “cooking with baobab” recipe book, he says.

Not only is baobab nutritious, it has “a very accessible, tangy taste” that blends nicely with different foods, Mr. Lee of Alpha Food says.

Kaibae harvests baobab in the wild and processes the fruit at its own facilities in Ghana.

Breadfruit, meanwhile, which grows on islands across the Pacific, is being used to make gluten-free flour by companies such as Jungle Project and Breadfruit Food Co. At the same time, jackfruit, a tropical fruit that is believed to have originated from parts of southeast Asia, is gaining ground as a meat substitute because of its high protein content.

“It’s a regular lineup in the cupboard. We always have a can of jackfruit in there,” says Lenore Edman, who runs an electronics business in Sunnyvale, Calif. She makes biryani with jackfruit once a month, mixing a fruit she prizes for its texture and flavor into her rice cooker with sauteed onions, spices and oil. “It’s a great thing for a vegetarian meal,” says Ms. Edman, who started seeing jackfruit products in her grocery stores around 2009.

Good Eggs Inc., a San Francisco-based online-grocery company, says it has been selling jackfruit products that mimic meat from Upton’s Naturals of Chicago since July 2016.

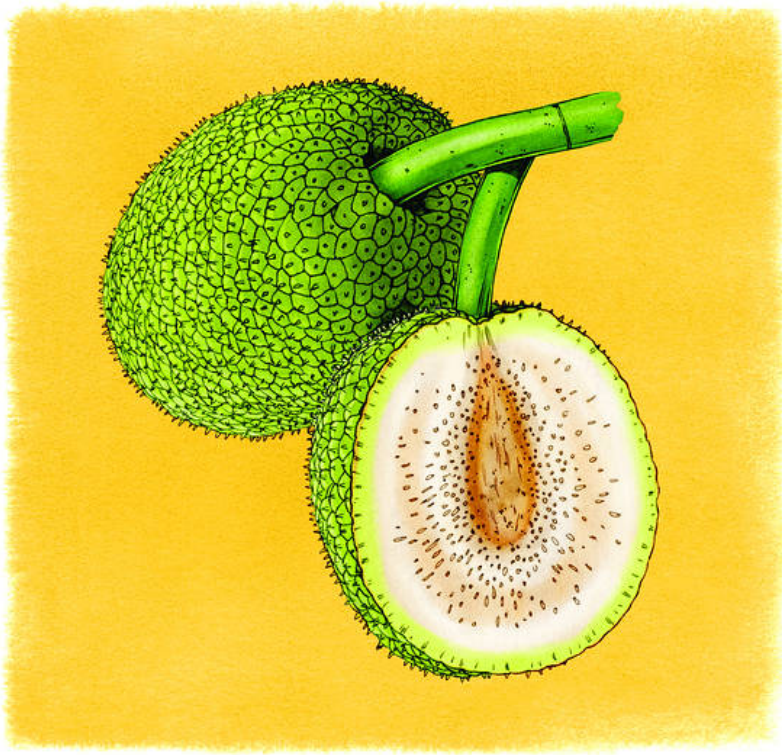
“Upton’s had come out with their line of jackfruit. It was really trending as an ingredient,” says Corey Rateau, a senior category manager at Good Eggs Inc. “In that time, consumers became more aware of what they’re putting in their body.”

Monk fruit, which monks in China have long added to their tea to boost immunity, is emerging as a sugar substitute, thanks to its naturally sweetening trait. Lakanto, based in Orem, Utah, makes a monk-fruit sweetener, as well as maple syrup and chocolate bars that are on sale at Costco Wholesale Corp., Whole Foods and Amazon.com Inc. Monk fruit appeals to consumers on a ketogenic diet because the sweetener has no calories or carbohydrates.

“We’re in a day and age where consumers are caring,” about where their food comes from, says Lakanto Chief Operating Officer Madison Hauver, who compared monk fruit to stevia, another sugar substitute that contains no calories or carbs. Chemical compounds in monk fruit are up to 300 times sweeter than those in sugar, Ms. Hauver says, meaning consumers need a fraction as much to achieve the same sweet taste.

Lakanto grows, harvests and processes monk fruit in China, and is building out its supply chain. “Our biggest challenge is being ready for the wave,” Ms. Hauver says.

Ms. Kang is a reporter for The Wall Street Journal in Chicago. Email her at jaewon.kang@wsj.com.



Breadfruit PHOTO: MICHAEL HOEWELER



Monk fruit PHOTO: MICHAEL HOEWELER

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What unusual fruits have you incorporated in your diet? Join the conversation below.

JOURNAL REPORT

- [Insights from The Experts](#)
- [Read more at WSJ.com/FutureofFoodReport](#)

MORE IN THE FUTURE OF FOOD

- [Food Companies Add AI to Their Recipes](#)
 - [What Rising Temperatures Mean for Coffee Farming](#)
 - [The Food Industry Looks to Turn Garbage to Gold](#)
 - [A New Source for Meat Substitutes: Fungi](#)
 - [Food Companies Put Their Supply Chains Under the Microscope](#)
-

-
- **College Rankings**
 - **College Rankings Highlights**
 - **Energy**
 - **Funds/ETFs**
 - **Health Care**
 - **Leadership**
 - **Retirement**
 - **Small Business**
 - **Technology**
 - **Wealth Management**

