

They are yellow, tangy and grow on trees.
But there's more to lemons than meets the eye
(and the nose and mouth) as
Michael Franco finds out.

pucker up



Citrus Limon. Acid Juice.





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their birthplace is the subject of much debate

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Lemons are a multi-sensory fruit. The unique scent released from the oil in the peel is a key ingredient in perfumes. A squirt of lemon juice in many recipes is proven to help enhance other flavors.

And a silver or ceramic bowl filled with them lightens the mood in the gloomiest room.

Whether being used to redden the lips of ladies at the court of Louis XIV, or to remove the shiver-inducing taste of tequila from a late-night reveller's mouth, lemons have had a history as colorful as the vibrant skin that define them.

Although the exact time and location of their birthplace is the subject of much debate, it appears that lemons have been around since at least 70 BCE, when they were featured in a mural found in the ruined city of Pompei.

Historians say it is likely the lemon arrived there from northern India, the generally accepted homeland of citrus limon, as the fruit is properly called. They were definitely well-established in Europe by the third-century. We know this from a story the Greek scholar Athenaeus wrote about two men who were thrown into a pit of venomous snakes as punishment. One, who was somehow able to snack on a lemon before taking the plunge survived, the lemon-less (and hapless) other man, did not. Bitter justice.

Better Pill

While uncovering the lemon's history is fascinating to modern scientific minds, the lemon has long been important to man for another reason: survival.

Scurvy, a vitamin-C deficiency disease that causes joint pain, spongy gums, tooth loss and anemia, is handily beaten by the humble lemon. While its use on British naval vessels is well-known, a less-well known fact is that lemons (first brought to the New World by Columbus in 1493), were also used to prevent scurvy among prospectors in the American west. During the 1849 California Gold Rush miners were willing to pay up to \$1 per lemon, which meant just a dozen would be worth about the same as an ounce of the precious gold they were pulling from the earth.

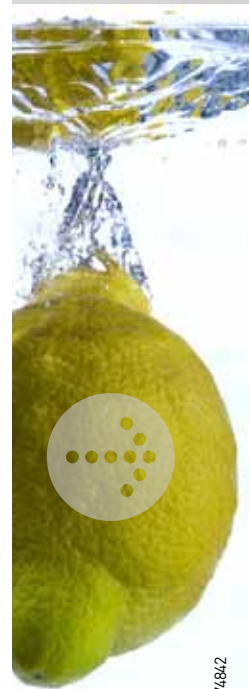
Most of the gold is long gone from California, but the lemons have remained. The state is the number-one producer of the fruit in America, which together with the European Union, China and Argentina, meets much of the world's lemon demand. Of all citrus fruits, the lemon is the least cold resistant, yet it can grow in even the poorest of soils, so if the climate is right, the lemon will thrive almost anywhere.



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Although lemons are no longer being used primarily to combat scurvy, the fruit is still considered to be a powerful health booster. One study has shown that the vitamin-C that helped British sailors keep their teeth is even more potent when derived from a lemon, because of the presence of bioflavonoids. These anti-oxidant-rich plant pigments, often referred to as Vitamin-P (so named by Hungarian scientist Albert Szent-Györgyi because they make veins more permeable) help the body absorb the vitamin-C. They are, interestingly, the reason why a lemon turns from green to yellow as it ripens.

Other health-enhancing benefits of the lemon are currently being explored, especially its power to fight cancer. Lemons contain lots of limonin (for the nerds: limonoate D-ring-lactone or limonoic acid di-delta-lactone), a readily-absorbable compound that can help fight cancer of the mouth, stomach, breast, lung, colon and skin. The most promising aspect of limonin compounds is that they tend to stay in our blood stream longer than other cancer-fighting compounds, such as those found in green tea.

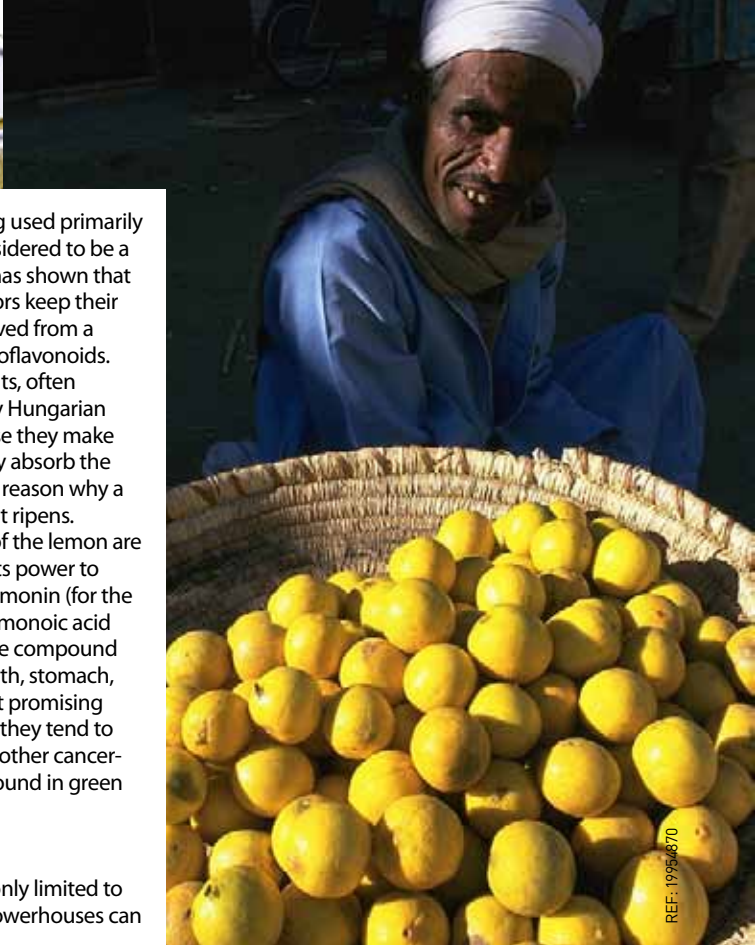
Mellow Yellow

Of course, the might of lemons isn't only limited to the medical arena; the little yellow powerhouses can help out around the home too.

Simply feed flowering plants a dash of lemonade to keep their blooms fresh; dip a cut lemon in some salt and use it to remove stains from copper pots or marble countertops; put a spoonful in the water when you next make rice to keep it from sticking; or drench a tough cut of steak in a lemon-juice based marinade - the citric acids will help dissolve the meat's connective tissues to make it nice and tender.

Most home chefs also know that lemons are great for keeping cut apples from turning brown. This is because the acidic juice interrupts a process in the apple flesh that causes it to oxidise. In addition to keeping apples fresh-looking, a sprinkle of lemon juice on top of guacamole will keep it bright green. And putting wilted lettuce in a refrigerated bowl of water and lemon juice for about an hour can restore its crispness.

So, if your salads are wilting, your teeth are wobbly, or if you're about to be tossed into a pit full of vipers, be sure to reach for the lemon. In the case of snakes it might not keep you from harm but all those anti-oxidants and vitamin-C should definitely help the wounds heal quicker.



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feed plants



Tart Start

The precise location of the first lemon tree may never be known, but recent research has solved one mystery about the multi-talented fruit: its genetic origin. It had long been theorised that the lemon we know today was a descendent of other citrus fruits; now Chinese researchers have analysed its genes and proved it: *citrus limon* is a fusion between the citron fruit and the sour orange. Rumour (though not research) says it travelled to Italy and was first cultivated in Genoa, then Columbus took a few to the New World with him. Today, most lemons purchased at market are one of two varieties: Eureka or Lisbon, and come with a pH (acidity rating) of 2 to 3. This is because lemon juice is about 5 – 6% citric acid, which gives lemons their characteristic sour taste, helps clean silver and deodorises the fridge.

Factoids

- The world's heaviest lemon was grown in Israel in 2003 and weighed 5.265kg (Guinness World Records).
- The lemon is technically a type of berry, known as a *hesperidium*.
- The white layer between a lemon's skin and flesh is known as its mesocarp.
- A mature lemon tree produces between 1,000 and 2,000 individual fruits per year.
- Monks in the middle ages thought lemons were evil



with lemonade to keep their blooms fresh