

Fleeting season makes pomegranates worth the effort

By Chris Macias, Sacramento Bee

Oh pomegranate, you can be such a pain. Extracting your juicy seeds can be so messy, turning a white T-shirt into an impromptu tie-dye. Yet, pomegranate, you are so darn delicious and healthy, and perfect for cooking or simply munching the seeds as a sweet snack.

Pomegranate ranks as an especially high-maintenance fruit, but get past its staining properties and trickiness in extracting the seeds, and you'll find plenty of payoffs in the kitchen. Sprinkle pomegranate seeds (also known as arils) over a salad to add some fruity snap, and use its rich juice in sauces and marinades.

We're now in the thick of pomegranate season, which generally starts in November and lasts through January. While the pomegranate is native to Western Asia – Iran and Iraq in particular – this sweet and tangy fruit has also found a home in California. Pomegranate trees thrive in areas with dry, sunny summers and cool winters, much like California's Central Valley and nearby Placer County.

According to the California Pomegranate Council, 4.5 million cases of pomegranates are shipped annually from the state's growers. Pomegranates are increasingly popular. In 2011, California was home to 30,000 acres of pomegranates – up from about 12,000 acres in 2006.

Some of that pomegranate winds up with Elaine Baker. She's one of the Sacramento area's most prominent pastry chefs, now working at Hawks in Granite Bay. One of her latest creations: a bittersweet chocolate baton with gingerbread purée, pomegranate sauce and pomegranate seeds.

“It’s a beautiful fruit, just the seeds themselves,” said Baker. “That’s why I like to use it on desserts. It’s a bit of a pain to use, but if you can keep it nice and clear there’s a beautiful, deep red color.”

But before we get into pomegranate reduction sauces and such, what’s the best way to deseed the darn thing? For starters, when shopping for a pomegranate, look for a fruit that boasts smooth skin and a rich red color. A mature pomegranate may also have a cracked skin, which for some folks marks the optimal time for eating.

“When they get that little crack, that’s the peak of good,” said Ralene Snow of Snow’s Citrus Court, which grows pomegranates in Placer County.

Deseeding the pomegranate is the tricky part, and can also stain your countertop if you’re not careful. Here’s one method:

1. Cut the crown off the fruit.
2. Cut through the skin in quadrants.
3. Break the fruit into four pieces.
4. With the seeds facing down into a bowl, bonk the top of the pomegranate with a wooden spoon to release the seeds.
5. Rinse the seeds in a colander and enjoy.

A typical fruit usually yields 1/2 to 3/4 of a cup of seeds. Then, the fun can begin.

Pomegranates usually are out of season by the end of January. The seeds, however, can be frozen if you’re interested in making a sorbet or granita for a future day.