

ORANGE CRUSH

THE STORY BEHIND THE SEXIEST OF CITRUS FRUITS, THE SUMO

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illustration by Tham Nguyen

The taste stopped me cold.

The next day I went back for a dozen more. I couldn't believe how delicious they were. The craggy, loose peel falls away from the fruit like a woman dropping her robe. There's no stringy pith, no seeds. The taste is bright and clear like birdsong on a sunny day, with an exploding rainbow of sweetness in your mouth. That is not hyperbole. The grocer who stood silently at the checkout noticed my basket filled exclusively with pricey Sumo oranges and gave me an approving nod.

"I do the same for my family," he said.

The Sumo—one-quarter navel, one-quarter satsuma mandarin, and one-half *ponkan* mandarin hybrid—originated in Japan, where it's called *Dekopon* and can fetch double-digit prices. It also has a cult following in Brazil, brought there by Japanese farmers, and in South Korea, where it's called *Hallabong*. Mike George, a California citrus grower who took an R&D mission to Asia, is responsible for our American harvest, which only came to market in 2011.

George, who is also president of Suntreat, a citrus-packing company, was in Japan checking out different grocery stores when he stumbled across the *Dekopon*. The fruit—incredibly sweet with a beautiful tart mandarin taste—was so divine, "he knew he had to bring it to the U.S.," explained Keith Costart, general manager for Sumo production at Suntreat.

Sumo's Brix levels (a type of sweetness measurement) are off the charts. "Normal is 10 or 12, but I have seen it go 16, 18, even as high as 20. It's powerhouse flavor," said Costart.

Researching more upon his return, George learned that this mysterious fruit was already in California. A man named Brad Stark Jr. had brought in the budwood a few years earlier, cleaned it up, and tested it for disease. Stark eventually sold the rights, and Suntreat procured California's only source of the budwood, which are the pencil-thin pieces grafted to root-stalk to grow hybrids.

George hand-selected 13 farms to be the first to grow the

fruit on American soil. The farmers signed confidentiality and exclusive marketing agreements in exchange for being taught the special methods for growing the fruit. George wanted everything kept secret before taking the product to market.

Next, they needed a name for their fruit, which wasn't the prettiest piece of citrus anyone had ever seen. The discussion was, "How do we make it beautiful and endearing from a marketing perspective?" remembered Seth Wollenman, sales and brand manager for Suntreat. The team seized on Sumo, a nod to the fruit's Japanese origin, large size, and distinctive topknot. "We kept coming back to that name," said Wollenman, because it was catchy, descriptive, and marketable.

George's own farm, 45 acres in the San Joaquin Valley, was among the 13. Jonelle George, his wife of 35 years, keeps an eye on their beloved Sumos. "You know how if you bite into an orange and those little sacks kind of pop and the juice runs down your face?" she asked. "I feel like Pavlov's dog. It makes me salivate just talking about them. If something is just sweet, it's like, 'OK, eh?' But Sumo has this burst of flavor. And the smell. When you pop that knot at the top, the smell is awesome."

Before she got into farming, Jonelle was busy taking care of her house and homeschooling her four children. But she longed to do more. "Just keeping my house clean is not gonna work for me," she thought, as her kids got older and began moving out. "I'm never going to be the lunch and bonbon crowd."

Her husband suggested she take over their personal farming. "Turns out I love irrigating," said Jonelle, who grew up in Orange County and has a degree in biology. "I've had a blast! My kids are slightly resentful because they had to walk through the grove with a five-pound bucket of water. Now I've got a Honda, and it's much more fun!"

But growing Sumos comes with a specific set of challenges and a very short window of availability—a piddling six to eight weeks, starting late January/early February. Before I knew this, I showered Sumos on everyone. I shared my stash with a friend having a bad day, with a cute guy, with a crotchety co-worker. "This is the best orange you will ever have," I told them earnestly. I kept going back for more, always buying whatever I could carry, oblivious that the supply would soon run dry.

"It's very labor-intensive to grow," said Jonelle. "It requires much more pruning, different irrigation, fertilizer. It's sun-burn-sensitive, so we use a natural mineral clay to protect the fruit," like zinc oxide on a lifeguard. "You have to remove a lot of the fruit, which can grow acidic and tasteless in some areas," so that others grow bigger and sweeter, she explained. But that yields less fruit per tree. Factor in product lost to citrus freezes and consulting costs with Brazilian and Japanese growers, and the mighty cost of the fragile fruit starts making sense.

Jonelle has a 16-acre grove in her backyard where the conditions for growing are ideal. She is experimenting with four acres of brand-new Sumo, only four to five months old when I visited, and she is growing some of the fruit on a trellis, as a highly unusual experiment. "Every little tree needs its own attention to help it grow the way it's supposed to grow. You're pruning and training every day, coming to understand what the nutritional needs of each block are, what kind of protection is needed," she said. "It's very analogous to raising kids."

