

THE AUSTRALIAN

Quince, fruit of the gods

JUDITH ELEN THE AUSTRALIAN APRIL 12, 2014 12:00AM



Quinces at Victor Harbor farmers' market. Picture: Lea Auerbach Source: Supplied

THE lumpy, downy “golden apples” we call quinces are thought to have grown originally in deciduous forests in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains stretching east from Iran and Turkestan or, more squarely, in the Fertile Crescent, which embraces Mesopotamia and stretches from the Persian Gulf to the Phoenician coast of the Mediterranean.

They were deeply appreciated by the Ancient Greeks, for whom the trees sprang up in Aphrodite's footsteps, and by the Romans. The “golden apples of the Hesperides” of Trojan legend (Paris's gift to Aphrodite) were probably quinces; even, as suggested in Jewish lore, Eve's “apple” in Eden.

Once firmly rooted in the Mediterranean, quinces became known as “Cydonian apples”, the Royal Horticultural Society notes (rhs.org.uk), after Minoan port Kydonia (now Chania), where they flourished in ancient times. Jane Grigson (Fruit Book) writes of seeing quinces in Crete's Chania market, “as golden as any apple of the Hesperides can have been against the blue autumn sky”. (Grigson's quince preserve and paste recipes can be counted on for reading pleasure plus results.)

Charlemagne had trees planted in his royal gardens in 812. Chaucer mentions coines (from French *coing*) in marmalades, jellies and candied sweetmeats. Edward I planted four quince trees at the Tower of London in 1275 (the Normans had probably taken them to England). Widely used in meat and sweet dishes through the Middle Ages, on into the 18th century, they were gradually edged out of kitchens and orchards by the more approachable apple and pear. An RHS article laments it is “sad yet understandable” that “they are rarely seen today”. Once a household staple with “an illustrious past”, they are “too astringent to eat fresh” but “no less

versatile than cooking apples”.

The insidious desire for fast food is surely to blame. Apples are so much easier to handle. But difficulty has its rewards: quinces are subtly different and deeply imbued with romance. British gardener Monty Don believes their fall from grace followed the 19th-century acceptance of raw fruit, which moved apples and pears up the favourites list. Don suggests adding one quince to a cooked-apple dish and savouring the transformation (dailymail.co.uk).

Mark and Lisa McCarthy (McLaren Vale Orchard, South Australia) grow Champion (a large, pear-shaped, late-ripening, 19th-century American cultivar) and Smyrna, ripening three weeks earlier. Mark says: “Smyrna’s better-looking, beautiful bright-yellow, starts slightly green. Champion is a little knobbly, ugly-looking, stays greener, but with more texture, it’s good for paste.” At Victor Harbor, Willunga and Adelaide Showground. Mark says Ashbourne Orchard has pineapple quinces, at Willunga, Adelaide and Mt Barker.

Con and Harry Mantzarapis (Victor Harbor and Adelaide) have quinces from four trees. “They came with the house,” Harry says. “Greek people were here before us; they like their quinces. Years ago, everyone had a tree in their backyard and it’s slowly starting back.”

Near Orange, NSW, John Reynolds (Nashdale Fruit Co) grows certified organic vegetables, heritage apples, pears, persimmons and quinces. He’ll be at Castle Hill (Hawkesbury Harvest) today, Windsor Mall market tomorrow and Glenbrook next Saturday. Ian Haines in Albany (Western Australia) lost “12 beauties” to possums. “There goes our quince jelly, paste, and apple and quince pies for another year!”

Pectin-rich quinces make perfect, caramel-rose jams and jellies. New Larousse Gastronomique includes quince compote cooked in vanilla syrup and quince liqueur (ratafia).

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