

Achingly Ripe

Tropical Fruit in Homestead, Florida

by Rowan Jacobsen

The road from US 1 to the Everglades cuts through vast, utterly flat agricultural fields where migrant workers labor in the distance. Tractor-trailer trucks pass, piled six feet high with what appear to be neon-green tennis balls. After you've passed two or three of the trucks you realize, with a shock, that these are America's tomatoes, on their way to be gassed red before they hit the supermarket. The tomatoes look so inedible, so impenetrable, that they seem out of place in steamy south Florida. What you encounter next, however, feels entirely right. Amid the fields looms an overgrown fruit stand that serves as something of an altar to all that is soft and ripe.

On the roof, large enough to lure passing planes in need of fruit, letters announce "ROBERT IS HERE." He always is, too — a plump, bearded presence in a red ROBERT IS HERE shirt with shorts and an apron. He's often wheeling crates of fruit into his store, pausing only to teach a customer how to open a coconut or the best way to slice a mango. Robert Moehling has been at this for 45 years, since he was six years old. The stand has grown since then, of course. Now it's a full-fledged enterprise, and it's evolved in the ways of all roadside businesses that survive. A sign trumpets mango, guanavana, and key-lime milkshakes to pull in overheated tourists, who take home plenty of T-shirts, fruit preserves, and other gift items. But those are really just ways of supplementing Robert's passion: the tropical and subtropical fruits for which southernmost Florida has quietly become the nation's Mecca.

Other than at ethnic markets, it isn't often that you walk into a store and can't recognize the produce. It's almost *never* true that the mystery fruit is local. But most of Robert's fruit comes from local commercial growers or from hobbyists who raise it on trees in their backyards. Everyone in the area knows Robert, and knows that if they bring him their fruit, he can sell it. In Robert Is Here on a February day you are surrounded by mamey, sapodilla, black sapote, guava, canistel, caimito, carambola, Florida avocado, and water coconut. In July, you will find sugar apple, ate-

moya, lychee, longan, mango, jackfruit, guanavana, and the strange and terrifying *Monstera deliciosa*, which is the world's only edible philodendron.

Anomalies pile on top of each other in any discussion of Robert Moehling and his business. In the built-yesterday world of Florida, occupying the same spot for 45 years makes Robert as constant as the pyramids. Forgoing airconditioning for open walls, huge fans, and thick tropical air makes him an atavism. But most of all, believing that he can convince passing tourists to buy fruits they have never heard of, and that exist in a state of deliquescence most Americans associate with the rubbish heap, makes him a dreamer and a visionary.

"We're really stupid about tropical fruit in this country," says Robert. "Half of what I do is try to educate people about what a tropical fruit should look, feel, and taste like." Ripe fruit is not necessarily pretty, and the fruits at Robert Is Here are achingly ripe. As you walk in, a mountain of papayas greets you, their yellow-green canvas dimpled with brown. Little Manzano bananas, mottled yellow and brown, emit intense banana-honey aromas. Purple and yellow passion fruits are shrunken and puckered, making you realize that every supermarket passion fruit you've ever seen was unripe. If you've eaten those and concluded that passion fruits are terrible, you are in for an awakening. Cut a mature passion fruit in half and you get two perfect egg cups filled with pleasantly crunchy seeds, tart chartreuse juice, and an unmistakable aroma from childhood — passion fruit is the top flavor note of Hawaiian Punch. "Passion fruit are addictive," says Robert. "They're so refreshing. Eating one makes you want another. I can eat an entire bucket at a sitting."

And not just passion fruit. As a small child growing up in 1950s Homestead, Robert would often disappear for the day. When he returned in the evening with orange mango stains covering his hair, cheeks, and clothes, his mother had a pretty good idea where he'd been. "Those pickers in our neighbor's grove took care of me," he says. "They liked having me around."

Not mangos but cucumbers gave Robert his start in the produce business. His father was a farmer who used brokers to sell his produce. One day a broker said he'd been unable to find a buyer for a large supply of cucumbers. Robert's father asked for them back, so he'd at least be able to reuse the crates. But what to do with the cucumbers? He decided to put his six-year-old son to work.

He dropped the boy off at a nearby crossroads on a Saturday morning, along with a table, the cucumbers, and some change in a coffee can. Robert sat all day. When he was picked up at dusk, he hadn't sold a single cucumber. No one had even stopped.

That can't be, thought his father. Perhaps people hadn't even noticed the small boy? He retrieved two hurricane shutters from the barn, spray-painted ROBERT IS HERE on each, and sent the boy back out on Sunday morning with the cucumbers and the table, framed by the hurricane shutters.

Late that afternoon Robert walked home. His father wasn't happy. You never abandon your business, he told Robert. Well, Robert explained, he had nothing left to do. He'd sold every cucumber.

Robert Moehling had acquired an immediate taste for the produce business. He manned his fruit stand every weekend. Neighboring farmers donated their extra mangos, papayas, avocados, and tomatoes to him. Once they realized how much money he was making, however, they made him start paying. Beginning in second grade, he set up the stand and coffee can every day with his ROBERT IS HERE sign and another that said HONOR SYSTEM. After school, the bus would drop Robert at the stand and he'd work the afternoon shift. No one ever stole from the can, but by Robert's third-grade year, the stand was doing too much business to be left untended during the day. So eight-year-old Robert hired his first employee, a retiree who knew his family.

In 1969, when he was 14, he began keeping the stand open 365 days a year. Other than to clean up after Hurricane Andrew, it never closed another day until five years ago, when Robert's oldest son was a senior in high school. Robert decided to spend more time with his children before they left home. He now shuts down in September and October. What does the family do together during that time? They paint the store.

The Trouble with Tropical Fruit

Most of us are used to the well-ordered seasons of temperate climates, where living things follow a schedule. Spring: flowers and babies. Summer: growth. Fall: harvest and slaughter. Winter: prepare for next year. Not so in the tropics. Many plants fruit throughout the year. Papayas, cacao, and jaborcaba, among oth-

ers, are *cauliflorous* — their fruit grows straight out of their trunks and main branches. This means you get flowers, tiny new fruits, *and* fully mature behemoths all mixed together on the same trunk — a strange sight for Northerners. It also means that machines can't harvest these fruits; it takes a human hand to pick the ripe fruit without damaging the next generation.

With no urgent need to mature before frost, tropical fruits devote themselves to other concerns, such as how to keep the abundant tropical insects from devouring their seeds before they are ready, and then how to entice mammals and birds into disseminating those seeds. That may be why many tropical fruits have a long, slow ripening, during which they break down bitter tannins and other astringent compounds and build intense sugar content and powerful aromas, signaling to everyone far and wide that they are ready to tango. For instance, mamey, a Cuban favorite, can take two years to transform itself from a flower into a mature fruit. Even then, it needs to be picked and set aside for ten days, until it is very soft. Mamey resembles a small football, with fuzzy, kiwi-like skin and flesh swirled pink and orange like a tropical sunset. A ripe mamey is as soft and moist as a cooked yam. If we didn't know better, those of us used to temperate fruit would toss it in the compost. We'd be missing an intense, spicy sweetness and a dense texture, a combination like perfumed pumpkin pie. Cubans love mamey ice cream and mamey flan. Combined with lemon juice and puréed, it makes an excellent sauce for cold meats.

Robert's handwritten signs extending from his piles of fruit remind you to adjust your understanding of ripeness. "Sapodilla: Eat when very soft. Tastes like a pear with brown sugar. Delicious!" "Canistel: Eat when very soft. Tastes like sweet custard." "Black sapote: Tastes like chocolate pudding. Ripe when fruit turns completely black and very soft."

To understand tropical fruit is to come to terms with decay, and nowhere is that more true than with black sapote. The pile of fruit next to the sign was soft, but green. Robert pulled me behind the counter, where an unmarked cardboard box held four ripe black sapotes. Take a persimmon, bake it in the oven for two hours, let it sit for a couple of days, and you have a semblance of a ripe black sapote. It looks like something forgotten and discovered much later in the deepest recesses of a refrigerator. "Now that's ripe," I



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The present sign at Robert Is Here; farmworkers picking tomatoes in front of Robert Is Here; boxes of ripe mamey and sapodilla; Robert Moehling.
Photographs by Rowan Jacobsen

said. Robert shrugged. “They could use another day or two.” I looked to see if he was kidding. He wasn’t. I bought all four. Black sapote, like many tropical fruits, must be eaten with a spoon, and, true to the sign, it does taste like chocolate pudding, though ironically like the instant boxed kind.

Many of the fruits Robert sells will never be seen in national supermarkets because they can’t withstand packing and shipping. At Robert Is Here, you aren’t just sampling better versions of typical market fare. You are tasting the essence of a place — a place unlike any other in America.

The Nation’s Fruit Basket

If the Great Plains are the nation’s bread basket, then Homestead is its fruit basket. But if you had arrived in the area a century ago, you would have been hard pressed to believe that it could grow anything. You’d have encountered a rock-hard plain of oolitic limestone covered with perhaps an inch of topsoil. But a mere two feet under that limestone was one of the most abundant supplies of fresh water in the country. Better still, the area offered a climate unique in the continental US. The very southern tips of Texas and California are also zone 10 on the USDA Plant Hardiness charts, but that is misleading. Texas and California are arid, while Homestead is humid, and the low temperatures that can last a week in Texas or California will endure

no more than a few hours in Homestead. Things will grow in Homestead that will grow nowhere else in the continental US.

So what to do about that limestone? One answer was to explode it with dynamite. Until the 1940s, that’s the way trees were planted in Homestead, and you could buy dynamite at every corner store. Farmers would drill a hole, fill it with dynamite, blast, plant the tree, and let the tree’s roots make their way through the fissured limestone to water. It worked shockingly well.

Another solution was rock plowing. Giant bulldozers with specially designed blades would shear the rock an inch at a time, turning it into a rough approximation of soil. The iron oxide in the plowed-up rock gave the area its agricultural name: the Redlands.

At first, the main crops were citrus and avocados, plus mangos and papayas for the enlightened market in Miami. Vegetables followed. But in the 1980s the mix of crops changed drastically. Surging immigration and yuppiedom created a new market open to exotic produce. Chris Rollins, director of Homestead’s Fruit & Spice Park and founder of the local Tropical Fruit Growers Association, says that within only four years carambola (star fruit) went from an oddity grown by local enthusiasts to a crop that couldn’t possibly keep up with demand. “Markets were desperate for star fruit. They scoured south Florida for every available tree.”

That was fortuitous, because at the same time that the trend toward exotics was taking off, south Florida’s longtime staple crops were facing punishing



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Chris Rollins with a jackfruit tree at the Fruit & Spice Park; the stand at Robert Is Here; ugli fruit, a type of citrus; poisonous plant sign at the park.

competition from the third world. One after another, raising them in Florida turned into economic suicide. Chris Rollins remembers a particular moment that, to him, marked the changing of the guard. He was with a friend who owned seven acres of lime groves. A packing company had picked 500 bushels of limes from the trees, but could find no market for the limes at any price. Instead of a check, Rollins's friend received a bill with a "picking charge" of 25 cents per bushel. "Right then," says Rollins, "he grabbed some chains, got on his tractor, and pulled out all seven acres of limes. He planted star fruit trees the next day."

Since then, Rollins has observed a pattern. Local growers take one of the many delights that have grown in south Florida for decades and spend time and money on education to develop a market. After a few years of success, a flood of inferior third-world produce arrives at absurdly low prices. "Dragon fruit is next," says Rollins. This market-friendly moniker is the Asian nickname for night-blooming cereus, a cactus. The four-inch fruits are works of art, with bright red skins covered in green-tipped, artichoke-like scales

and a stunning purple interior, flecked with black kiwi-sized seeds, that tastes of melon. Fifteen years ago, Rollins saw them for sale in Hong Kong for \$7 apiece and realized their potential. He predicts that Florida dragon fruit will have a few excellent years in US supermarkets before they lose out to imports.

The Tragedy of Mangos

Nowhere is the lack of a high-quality domestic supply of fruit more poignant than with mangos. When I mention my mango enthusiasm to my New England friends, they are usually perplexed. Their experiences with mangos have not been good. What they've encountered is a juiceless, chalky fruit with a basic sweetness and run through with large, unpleasant fibers. What they've encountered is the dismal variety with the curious name of Tommy Atkins.

The Tommy Atkins aside, few fruits approach mangos' complexity, variety, and flat-out deliciousness. Like a well-made perfume, a ripe mango delivers top, mid, and base notes. Top notes of pine and turpentine

are provided by volatile turpenes. That whiff of gasoline, concentrated in the oil glands near the skin, can be off-putting to someone who has never tried a ripe mango, but it is sought after by mango fans. Creamy, coconutty mid-notes are provided by fatty-acid-based lactones (similar to those in peaches and, yes, coconuts), while comforting caramel base notes come from the mature sugars. Also present are hints of musk and cashew (to which mango, and poison ivy, are related). Mango is high in both sugar and acidity, making it more delectable than low-sugar fruits such as papaya, and more refreshing than the many low-acid tropical fruits, such as banana, mamey, and canistel.

In addition to mango's incomparable aroma, it has perhaps the most satisfying texture of any fruit. Somehow it accomplishes the contradictory task of being pleasantly firm and incredibly juicy at the same time. This may be due to the tiny fibers in the flesh, which allow it to be bathed in syrupy juice without breaking down, giving it body and an *al dente* bite.

At least, that's what a mango should taste like. And it does, if it's a Kent mango allowed to ripen on the tree. Sadly, you will not discover such a mango in the United States outside of south Florida (unless you have Robert Is Here ship some mangos to you).

"Mangos are a tragedy in this country," says Chris Rollins. There is virtually no domestic mango production anymore, because so much cheap fruit is available from Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America. But an imported mango can never be a great mango, for the simple reason that all imported mangos must be dipped in boiling water long enough to kill any fruit flies hiding *within* the flesh. They're cooked, and taste about as much like fresh mango as ultrapasteurized whipping cream does like raw cream. The boiling drives off the volatile turpenes that give mango much of its distinctive aroma, and it does no favors to the texture, either.

Compound this problem with an old story: the mangos supplied to supermarkets in the United States were not developed to taste good. The Tommy Atkins mango is favored because its predominantly red skin looks the way we think a mango should look. It's also hard and low in juice, meaning it ships and stores superbly. But it tastes terrible. The newest mango on the supermarket scene is the Ataulfo, from Mexico. It's small, yellow and green, and is a vast improvement over the Tommy Atkins, but still a far cry from great.

Robert Moehling insists that the world's best mango is the Kent. That's all he grows on his ten acres, which have just begun to produce again after his original grove was wiped out by Hurricane Andrew in 1992. I asked Chris Rollins to pick a favorite, but he resisted. "What's the best painting in the Louvre?" he said. He grows 120 varieties of mango in the Fruit & Spice Park and has possibly tasted more kinds of mango than anyone else on the planet. Every June he holds a mango festival at the park with more than 50 varieties on hand to sample. When I pressed him, he listed some of his favorite mangos: Kent, Glenn, Valencia Pride, Florigon, Carrie, Malika, Neelum, Haden, and Nam Doc Mai. "It all depends on your background," he said. "Mangos vary wildly. Some are smooth and mild, some taste strongly of carrot and resin. People often have intense associations with mangos from their childhood. Here at the park, I can tell where someone is from by which mangos they are drawn to. If you like the Nam Doc Mai, you're from Vietnam. If you like the Alphonse, you're from India. The Julie? Jamaica or Trinidad."

The Fruit & Spice Park

Homestead sprawls over thousands of acres. It can be fascinating to drive past plantations of coconut palms and tropical nurseries, but it's a lot of ground to cover. For a distillation of Homestead's extraordinary fecundity, all you need to do is visit the 35-acre Fruit & Spice Park. It's the only county park of its kind in the world, devoted to showcasing the bounty of the tropics. More than 500 varieties of fruit, spice, and nut trees mingle on its grounds, including 70 bananas, 55 avocados, and those 120 mangos. If it grows in the tropics or subtropics and produces fruit, chances are you'll find one here. (The major exceptions are certain true rainforest species that can't abide any dryness.) Not only will you find the fruit here, you will have a chance to taste it. The park rule is that you can't pick any fruit from the trees — but anything that has hit the ground is fair game. Whether you are allowed to *encourage* fruit to fall is open to interpretation.

To walk the Fruit & Spice Park is to wander a kind of primate's dreamscape, the Garden of Eden without the questionable apple. Towering trees provide cool, shadowy escapes from the south Florida sun. Insects flit in the leaf litter; birds call from the canopy overhead.

The air is sweet with unfamiliar perfumes. Mysterious fruit hangs everywhere. You reach for it, safe in the knowledge that God (or, at least, Chris Rollins) is looking out for you. All the dangerous stuff is fenced off in a section marked “POISONOUS PLANT COLLECTION.”

In a three-hour foray through the park, during which I became agreeably lost amid broad-leafed jungle foliage and tangled paths, I experienced the taboo-breaking frisson of picking up things I’d never before seen and popping them in my mouth. Jaboticaba resembles lilac, but out of its trunk grow purple-black globes the size of large grapes with a lychee-like sweet lime-and-nutmeg taste. Wild strawberry tree has small pink berries with a distinct cotton-candy flavor. Loquats taste like kumquats without the acid. Star apple looks like a plum on the outside, a star-sapphire on the inside, and it has a flowery perfume. Rollinia is sweet and creamy inside, like lemon yogurt, and, like its relations the soursops, must be eaten with a spoon. The very sweet star fruit sent juice cascading down my chin, reminding me of watermelon.

Local growers founded the Fruit & Spice Park in 1944, thinking of it more as a living seed bank than as a visitor attraction. When Rollins became director in 1981, much of the land was lying fallow. He had planted hundreds of new trees when, a decade later, Hurricane Andrew devastated the park. “That was a blessing in disguise,” says Rollins. It allowed him to start fresh. Instead of the former taxonomic layout, he implemented an ethnobotanical master plan, in which the plants are grouped by culture and geography. In one corner of the park, for example, you’ll get a pretty good idea of what you might find in a market in Thailand. In another corner, you can sample the sacred abiu and other fruits of the Amazon.

Unexpectedly, this redesign turned the park into a magnet for Miami’s many immigrants. “We often get elderly first-generation immigrants, who bring their grandchildren to the park. They may not have seen a particular kind of tree since they left their homelands forty years ago. Some of these fruits have strong emotional resonance for them, and they want to pass that on to their grandkids.”

This “emotional resonance” can be a problem. Fruit gets stolen, particularly jackfruit. Jackfruits are extraordinary. Rollins describes their flavor as a combination of banana, cantaloupe, and Juicyfruit Gum. The fruits can grow up to 100 pounds and are

a staple food for millions in tropical Asia, yet they are rare in the United States. That makes a fully laden tree as irresistible as a diamond under glass. “We’ve had people charge out the gate with jackfruits tucked under their arm like a football,” says Rollins. “We’ve had people try to smuggle them out in baby buggies, with the blankets tucked up around them. Last year I discovered a very old Asian woman trying to throw a 30-pound jackfruit over our eight-foot fence.” He asks, “What do you do in a situation like that? I left her alone.” During July and August, the park now hires security guards to protect the ripe jackfruit.

It’s not hard to appreciate the reverence for fruit underlying such desire. Among foods, fruit’s relationship with us is unique. Most attempts to “do” anything to fruit end up with a creation inferior to the fruit in its natural, raw form. That runs counter to most foods. Meats and vegetables usually benefit from the cook’s attention, even if it’s something so simple as grilling a steak or dressing a salad. Not so with fruit. Fruit achieves perfection without us.

The reason, of course, is that meat and vegetables don’t much want to be eaten, while that is fruit’s very purpose. Fruit exists to entice animals into eating the seeds buried in its flesh and dispersing those seeds, along with a starter dose of nutrients. It’s an old agreement. We animals get the sugar — which we crave because it is the most convenient form of food energy, our primary day-to-day need — and the seeds get a free ride. Many millions of years of evolution have gone into making fruit as irresistible as possible. And why should we resist when the natural world throws itself at our feet (sometimes literally) and *begs* to be eaten? Each time we sink our teeth into a ripe fruit and feel a rush of primal pleasure, we renew an ancient and life-affirming covenant.

Addresses in Homestead

Robert Is Here: 19200 SW 344th Street (from US 1 in Florida City, follow the signs for the Everglades — turn west on SR 9336 and drive about four miles to the stand), tel 305.246.1592, www.robertishere.com; open every day.

Fruit & Spice Park: 24801 SW 187th Avenue (from downtown Homestead, drive north on Krome Avenue to SW 248th Street and turn left), tel 305.247.5727, www.fruitandspicepark.org; open every day. 📍