



Press Release

What cactus tastes like and six other thorny questions on prickly pears

Raspberries, blackberries, roses...Prickly pears...There are some things in life worth getting pricked for, even by those that come with a warning in their name. I Love Fruit & Veg takes the thorns out of prickly pears by answering your questions on how to best prickle your taste buds with a fruit spiked with an extraordinary amount of nutritional goodness.

Switzerland, August 2023 - What do the coat of arms of Mexico, Italian fences and jazz pop have in common? The prickly pear! If this amazing fruit has earned a place on country emblems, picturesque villages, sofas and catchy songs, it has certainly earned a place on your plate.

Whether or not you've encountered the prickly pear before, you most likely have a few questions about this fascinating cactus fruit. Let's see exactly what prickly pears are and how to best enjoy them.



Are prickly pears the same as pears?

Nope. Prickly pears are only named so because their shape resembles a spiky pear. In fact, prickly pears belong to the *Opuntia* genus of the Cactaceae cactus family. The most common edible species is the *Indian fig opuntia*. Prickly pears are so prickly because of their hairlike prickles called glochids. These glochids can cause substantial pain, as they easily stick to skin or hair, and can even detach from the plant for maximum spike damage.



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The plant of the prickly pear looks like an entanglement of pads or stems, also called cladodes. The plant can grow up to 7 meters in height and 1 meter in width, hence its usefulness as a fence. It's no surprise that since it is a cactus, the prickly pear plant likes hot, dry weather and can spread into large colonies, even in mountainous regions.

What do prickly pears taste like?

It is generally said that a prickly pear tastes like a super sweet watermelon. Some say there is also a hint of bubble gum flavour, overripe strawberry, earthy undertones and a pineapple-like texture.

Are there different types of prickly pears?

All good things come in three, and prickly pears are no exception. Prickly pears come in three colourful varieties. The yellow cultivar (another word for a man-made plant variant) carries the exotic name of Sulfarina. This is the most widespread type of prickly pear, mostly due to its productive capacity. The ripe fruit is yellowish, very sweet, soft and rich in vitamin A.

The red cultivar, also called Sanguigana, is one of the most beloved prickly pear varieties. This is probably due to its ruby red colour, sweet taste and crumbly flesh. An added bonus is that Sanguigana has less seeds and more vitamin C than the other prickly pear variants.

The white cultivar, or Muscaredda, is the most precious of the three varieties. This prickly pear variety is green in colour when it is ripe and has a delicious sweet taste and crunchy flesh texture.



Where can I find prickly pears?



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Prickly pears are native to Mexico with evidence suggesting the species was first in use 8000 years ago. Prickly pears were transported to Spain at the beginning of the 16th century. At that time, the cactuses were valued for their hosting of cochineal, an insect parasite, from which red food and cosmetic dye was extracted.

From Spain, the prickly pear quickly spread through the hot, dry Mediterranean area. It didn't stop there. The fruit was then introduced to Africa, Asia and Australia, mainly through sailors who ate prickly pears, which with their high content of water and vitamin C, helped prevent scurvy on long journeys.

Today in Europe, you can find prickly pears in gardens or as fences in Italy, France, Spain, Bulgaria, Portugal, Greece, Albania, Cyprus and Malta. The prickly pear is particularly at home in Sicily, Italy, where the salty air and hot sun create ideal growing conditions for the cactus. The plant fares especially well in the semi-arid climate of Etna, Italy, in large part due to the ability of its roots to dissolve volcanic soils.

The prickly pear has become so prominent in the area that it has received the recognition of Protected Designation of Origin in 2003 with the name of Prickly Pear of Etna P.D.O. Arguably one of the best Indian-fig prickly pears carries the name of Silico, as it is grown on the foothills of Mount Etna, where the soil quality contributes to the extraordinary organoleptic and nutritional properties of the crop.

Although they grow in many places, prickly pears do not grow all year long. There are two main harvesting periods for prickly pears, in August and September for the "first flowers" and October and November for the late fruits.

Are prickly pears good for you?

Yes, prickly pears have so many health benefits that some even consider them to be a superfood.

In early Native American societies, prickly pears were the go-to-cure for everything from indigestion to burn wounds, in part due to the plant's antiviral and anti-inflammatory properties.

Prickly pears also contain high dietary fibre, which helps with indigestion, gastrointestinal processing and can help you feel full after eating. All the minerals (iron, potassium, magnesium, calcium and phosphorus) and vitamins (A, group B, C) in prickly pears can help with osteoporosis, diabetes, high cholesterol, obesity and hangovers.

The high levels of antioxidants, infection-fighting proteins and kaempferol in prickly pears play a role in your body's resistance to cancer and heart disease. And while it is high in good minerals and nutrients, the fruit is low on substances it's better to avoid, such as cholesterol, saturated fats and sodium. A superfood indeed!

How can I eat prickly pears?

Now that you have got your hands on the good part of the prickly pear, what can you do with this fruit? Well, you can consume the leaves, flowers, stems and fruits. Use them to make anything from:



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- Soups
- Salads
- Main dishes
- Bread
- Dessert
- Sweets
- Jam
- Drinks
- Ice cream
- Liquors
- Juice

Let's look at three recipes among the many suggested by the producers' organisation O.P. La Deliziosa.

A smoothie for little picky eaters to enjoy prickly pears:

Preparation: Wash the fruit under running water, then peel and roughly chop the prickly pears before placing them in the juicer or blender. A little mint and lemon will give your juice an extra touch!

Prickly pear juice, with its full-bodied consistency and a delicious taste without the addition of sugar or other sweeteners, is a perfect way to let you enjoy the beneficial properties of this seedless fruit!

For an adult version, try adding it to the preparation of your cocktails for an original and unexpected result! Excellent paired with prosecco or tequila.

Romantic Italian prickly pear risotto evening

Ingredients for 2

800 ml of vegetable broth

1 onion

200g Carnaroli rice

100 ml of dry white wine

700g of Etna PDO prickly pears + 2 prickly pears to garnish

30g of Parmesan

extra virgin olive oil as needed

salt and pepper, to taste

a few fresh mint leaves, to decorate

Put the vegetable broth in a saucepan and bring it to a boil. Keep warm over a very low heat.



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Meanwhile, slice an onion and sauté gently in a pan in extra virgin olive oil for a few minutes.

Add the rice and toast it until it becomes translucent, then add the white wine to deglaze.

Once the alcohol has evaporated, start slowly adding the warm vegetable broth.

For the prickly pear juice, wash and peel the prickly pears by first removing the ends, then cutting the peel to separate it from the pulp.

Blend them in a food processor/blender and sieve through a large mesh strainer to remove the seeds.

When the rice is half cooked, add the prickly pear juice.

Meanwhile peel the two prickly pears left for the garnish and cut into chunks.

Add a pinch of salt and, once the rice is cooked, stir in the Parmesan cheese over the heat.

Serve, with a twist of freshly ground pepper and garnished with prickly pear chunks and, if desired, a few mint leaves.

A burst of freshness with a prickly pear salad

- 3 prickly pears, one of each colour
- 6 lettuce leaves
- ½ fennel bulb
- red onion to taste
- flaked almonds
- shelled pistachios
- 2 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil
- 3 tablespoons of vinegar
- 1 tablespoon of lemon juice
- salt

Cut the lettuce into a salad bowl; in a separate dish, cut the onion and fennel into thin slices, then peel the prickly pears and cut them into thick circles. Emulsify the oil, the vinegar, and the lemon juice with salt, and then pour the dressing on the lettuce and season it evenly.

After seasoning the base, have fun arranging the rest of the ingredients to create an original and colourful presentation; finally add the pistachios and almonds. Et voilà, your simple and tasty prickly pear salad is ready!

This post starts with trivia and ends with trivia. Did you know that August is prickly pear month? If you guessed right, it is because August is prickly pear harvest time.

Congratulations, you can finish reading now and run to the store to find some prickly pears immediately. Enjoy.

Enjoy.

It's from Europe!



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