

Delicious and packed with vitamins, prickly pears a highly sought-after commodity in the Mediterranean

Pear necessities

KEVIN HANN
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As the mid-morning sun bathes the town of Biancavilla, in the Sicilian countryside, Giovanni Bua seems to be in a bit of prickly mood.

That can only be a good thing! Bua is strolling through a 20-hectare orchard that annually produces 30,000 kilos of his favourite fruit, the prickly pear.

Springing to life from a spiny cactus pad, which itself is edible, the prickly pear is a highly sought-after commodity in the Mediterranean. Sweet and juicy, but packed with tiny seeds, the pears are high in fibre, increase the sense of satiety and reduce the absorption of sugars, useful for a low-calorie diet. They are also high in vitamins C, B5 and B6, and folate.

The quality and unique character of the Bua family's

prickly pears, which are never treated with chemicals, have earned protected designation of origin status within the European Union. This designation recognizes the geographical region and processes used to naturally grow and harvest the produce.

In 1988, Bua's father Pietro founded OP La Deliziosa, an organization that promotes local growers with a commitment to producing high-quality fruit and vegetables. The organization has 112 members who cultivate an area of 1,600 hectares, including 1,000 citrus fruits, 5,000 prickly pears and 100 with various fruit trees.

OP La Deliziosa is now managed by Pietro's sons Giovanni, Antonino and Salvatore.

The organization is a member of the I Love Fruit and Veg from Europe program, aimed at encouraging the



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purchase and consumption of seasonal European produce. The campaign, also promoted by producer organizations

Agritalia, AOA, Meridia and Terra Orti, is co-financed by the European Commission and targets markets in Canada.

Giovanni Bua, president of OP La Deliziosa, which promotes producers of fruits and vegetables in Sicily, carves up a prickly pear at his orchard near Mount Etna.



Sarah Bua, Giovanni's niece and public relations manager for OP La Deliziosa, says prickly pears are more than just sustenance. They also act as a natural air purifier, absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere

at night and releasing it during the day.

The plants don't require much soil, easily grow in rocky climes and thrive in a mild climate and the volcanic ash spewed from nearby Mount Etna.

"The diversity of produce we have in this area is incredible because the soil is rich and fertile," Sarah adds. "We do not use chemicals at all. Our production does not use anything except for manual work to clean something that we love. We offer a natural product."

The plants begin to bloom in May or June, depending on the weather, and are harvested from August to October.

Demand for the unique fruit is growing across Europe.

"Parts of Italy that have never seen prickly pears are now buying them more and more," Sarah says, adding that her family has started creating its first line of juice from the harvest.

A tasting of the new product, labelled Sicilio, at the family's headquarters confirmed it to be of a thicker consistency than an apple juice, for example, but thoroughly thirst-quenching. It could easily be enjoyed in a mixed cocktail.

"We're trying to create a culture around it," Sarah says.

For more information about products, nutrition and recipes, visit ilovefruitandvegfromeurope.com/ca

SARAH BUA'S RISOTTO WITH ETNA PRICKLY PEARS



Sarah Bua
at the family
orchard.

INGREDIENTS

- 3.5 cups (800 mL) vegetable stock
- 1 onion
- 7 oz (200 g) Carnaroli rice
- 1/2 cup (100 mL) dry white wine
- 25 oz (700 g) Etna prickly pears, plus 2 more prickly pears for garnish
- 1 oz (30 g) Parmesan
- Extra virgin olive oil, as necessary
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- Fresh mint leaves for garnish

METHOD

Put the vegetable stock in a saucepan and bring it to a gentle boil. In the meantime, slice an onion and sauté in a large frying pan in extra virgin olive oil for a few minutes.

Stir in the rice to toast until it becomes translucent, then add the white wine and let it evaporate.

Once the alcohol has evaporated, start adding the just boiling vegetable stock slowly.

To prepare the prickly pear juice, wash 25 oz (700 g) of prickly pears and cut both ends off, then make a vertical slice down the body of the skin, and gently peel back the skin

from the flesh. Liquidize the flesh in a blender and then sieve or pass through a vegetable mill to eliminate the seeds.

When the rice is half cooked, add the prickly pear juice. Salt to taste, and when the risotto is cooked, turn off the heat and stir in the grated Parmesan for a creamy risotto.

Serve with a few grinds of pepper and garnish with the diced flesh of the remaining two prickly pears, prepared while the risotto is cooking and, if you like, a few leaves of mint.

Preparation time: 30 minutes.

Serves 2.

— Kevin Hann