

YUCATÁN: A CULINARY EXPEDITION

INGREDIENTS



NARANJA AGRIA, AMARGA

Botanical name

Citrus aurantium ssp. amara

Mayan name

Su'uts' pak'áal

Common English names

Seville orange, sour orange, bitter orange

Etymology

- *Naranja*, like most words for “orange” in European languages, originated from the Sanskrit *nagaruka* or *naranga* which was subsequently transmitted via Arabic *naranjah* and Persian *narenj*.
Agria and *amarga* both derive from *amara*, the Latin word for “bitter”.
- *Citrus aurantium ssp. amara* derives from Greek and Latin words. *Citrus* comes from the Greek *kedromelon*, “apple of cedar”. The Romans shortened the Greek name to *citrus*. *Aurantium* derives from *aurum*, the Latin word for “gold” and is an obvious reference to the fruit’s color when ripe.
Amara is the Latin word for “bitter”.
- *Su'uts'* (sour) is an ancient Mayan word that describes a universal human taste sensation, whereas *pak'áal* (orange) is a contrived word to signify the fruit that only arrived in the New World relatively recently. Many ingredients in Yucatán have only Spanish names, not Mayan ones, implying that the food arrived after the Maya had been assimilated. That there is a Mayan word for “orange” would confirm the fact that the fruit arrived shortly after the conquest.
- *Seville* refers to the fruit’s early cultivation in Sevilla, Spain, by the dominant Arabic culture. *Orange* is both a shortening of the original Sanskrit (*n*)*aranga* and a phonic reference to the Latin word for “gold” – *aurum*.

History and heritage

The sour or bitter orange is indigenous to southeastern Asia. Arabs are believed to have carried the bitter orange to Arabia in the 9th century. By the 12th century, they had introduced it into Arabic realms in Sicily and southern Spain, particularly Sevilla, which was the center of Arabic culture on the Iberic peninsular and where it was widely cultivated. For 500 years, until the Portuguese introduced the sweet orange, it was the only orange in Europe. It was the first orange to reach the New World, and by 1568, it had become naturalized in tropical Mexico and Yucatán. Not long thereafter it spread throughout the Caribbean.

Culinary uses

In Yucatán, *naranja agria* is an indispensable part of the regional cuisine. Mixed with water and sugar, sour orange juice becomes a refreshing beverage called *naranjada*. Unsweetened, it is used like vinegar, the juice quickly pickling onions and other vegetables served as condiments. The juice is also employed in several table sauces, dips, and as a primary ingredient in various meat marinades, particularly the famous *pibil* dishes when mixed with *achiote*, or on its own in the wood-grilled pork dish, *poc chuc*. On a worldwide industrial scale, the essential oil derived from the dried peel of unripe sour orange – particularly from selected varieties “Jacmel” from Jamaica and the aromatic “Curacao” (var. *curassaviensis*) – gives a distinctive flavor to certain liqueurs. And oils distilled from the flower of the sour orange, such as “Neroli” and “Petitgrain” are used in flavorings for candy, baked goods, soft drinks and various condiments. But perhaps the greatest use of sour oranges as a food is in the form of marmalade, with thousands of tons of the fruit exported annually to England and Scotland for that purpose. When Seville orange juice is not available, a suitable substitute is 2 parts fresh lime juice, 1 part each fresh orange juice and grapefruit juice.