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Food Detective: You've seen one date, you haven't seen them all

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Last Modified: Nov 27, 2011 12:30PM

Wandering through the Aswan market in Upper Egypt, I was intrigued by the colorful variety of dates laid out in tidy square display racks at many small shops.

I stood for several minutes outside one particularly well-stocked stall, Nubian Oasis Spices, trying to attract the attention of the saleswoman hovering in the back of the store. She seemed to be hiding, but when my continued presence made clear I wasn't leaving without dates, she came forth in traditional hijab.

Gesturing that I wanted a sampling of her many dates, she filled my bag with pale beige, long and wrinkled brown, reddish, slightly green and purple-black varieties. I came away with a kilo for 10 Egyptian pounds - less than \$2.

In the United States, it seems we have access to basically one kind of date. You know which one I'm talking about: the light brown, honey-sweet Medjool, with its thick, shiny flesh and almost caramel-like consistency.

Very few shops in Chicago carry fresh dates (among them, Fresh Farms International Market at 2626 W. Devon, though the season for them is fleeting); you'd be lucky to find more than two varieties of dried dates in most stores.

Dates have long been a staple of the Egyptian diet. Chiseled into the ancient tomb walls in Sakkara are pictures of date palms, the fruit-bearing trees that have preserved life in this largely desert land for millennia.

There's an Egyptian saying: "You'll never go hungry when there are dates in the house." When dried, these fruits have a remarkably long shelf life, resisting rot while remaining edible (provided you have good teeth). The sun that bakes this North African country furnishes the energy to dehydrate these fruits and render them as seemingly eternal as the mummies of the pharaohs who, no doubt, ate their share of dates thousands of years ago.

Back from the market, I snacked on my assortment of dried dates. Some were lightly fruity, others sweeter. A few were powdery inside, while others were gummier, meatier, even a touch salty or acidic.

To feed people in an industrialized nation, agro-businesses focus on just a few marketable breeds of animals or plants. Ironically, one sometimes finds in small markets of developing countries a more varied range of produce. It's as though poverty creates conditions more suitable to the rich array of what the earth has to offer.

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