

WHERE HAVE ALL THE DOMESTIC CHESTNUTS GONE?

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By Anita Bushell

Ever wonder why chestnuts in the produce aisle come from, of all places, Italy? I did, when I spied them on a dull November day, while placing sweet potatoes in my cart. Late fall had officially arrived, and purchases of berries and melons had transitioned to root vegetables and, maybe, chestnuts.

As I lifted handfuls of the smooth brown nuts into a pale green bag, I thought that perhaps my spouse might roast them later that day. And that was when I saw the sign saying the chestnuts hailed from Italy.

“We sell between 50-150 lbs. at their peak,” John Horsman, a buyer for the Coop’s produce department says, “for a few weeks leading up to Christmas. We purchase our chestnuts directly from Hunts Point Market. Our current suppliers at the moment are not offering an American chestnut but I have asked if they will look into it for next year. We have traditionally purchased our chestnuts from Italy since we have not seen chestnuts offered on any of our availability lists from local sources.”

Why not local? There’s a simple answer: blight. Beginning in the early 1900s, approximately three billion East Coast American chestnuts were wiped out, victims of the fungus *Cryphonectria parasitica*, discovered on the bark of a dying chestnut tree at the Bronx Zoo. Researchers traced the fungus to Japanese chestnut trees, which began arriving in the U.S. as early as 1876. By the 1950s, the number of American chestnuts lost to the blight was an estimated 4 billion.

Yet miraculously the chestnut, which is rich in vitamin C, antioxidants and calories, and whose leaves contain high levels of essential plant nutrients, has not died. Millions of American chestnuts, sprouting from old roots, manage to survive in forests in the Washington, D.C. region and in other locations in the eastern United States.

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Until the blight, the mighty American chestnut, which could grow as tall as 120 feet and was referred to as the “redwood of the East,” populated the East Coast for 30 to 40 million years, thriving in forests from Maine to Florida, nourishing not only humans, but animals. Its benefits were so widespread that Indigenous peoples of the Appalachians, such as the Catawba, Chantah and Chikasha, cultivated the tree.

In addition, the chestnut was a valuable source of timber that was considered the sin-

gle most American cut tree species in 1915. According to a 2020 *New York Times Magazine* article: “As railroad ties and telephone poles, where durability trumped aesthetics, chestnut helped build industrial America.” Chestnut barns, cabins and churches still stand today. When the blight began killing thousands of American chestnut timber trees, the *Times* called it “the most rapid and destructive fungus known to the world.”

These days the American chestnut is undergoing a transformation as multiple non-profit organizations, including the American Chestnut Foundation, try to develop a blight-resistant American chestnut tree through research and breeding. The foundation refers to the state of the chestnut as one of demise, rather than extinction. According to its website, “The blight cannot kill the underground root system as the pathogen is unable to compete with soil microorganisms.”

As it turns out, the East Coast chestnut is once again available, just not in vast quantities. Thanks to the innovation and hybridization of folks like Kim and David Bryant, founders of Virginia Chestnuts in Shipman, Virginia, local chestnuts are available for purchase on certain specialty websites. However, they’re not yet available in the amount or at the price point that the Coop would need.

On a cold December afternoon, my spouse and I peeled the skins off those warm roasted Italian chestnuts. They were quite delicious, with a rich flavor and velvety texture. Still, I am looking forward to the day when my Coop spoils include the glorious American chestnut.

Anita Bushell is a freelance writer and native New Yorker. She just published Object Essays, and is currently working on her second novel. She has written for Bristol Noir, the San Antonio Review, Friends Journal, Grande Dame Literary, Apple in the Dark, Motherwell, and Uncensored: American Family Experiences with Poverty and Homelessness.