

## On Eating Plums

My family never really was into plums; as people, we were more into the sickly nectar sweetness of mangoes or the crispy tangy flavor of barely ripe apples. Of course, this may have been because where I come from, there aren't too many places that sell plums.

Well that's not exactly true – dried plums, or as many people still call them, prunes, are sold everywhere at any time, for fairly reasonable prices. And, living in a place that is home to a significant number of Chinese people, I have also had my fair share of the dried, candied plums that they sell in those little stalls, plums whose real flavors have been altered significantly by the drying and the ginger or the salt. But as a young person, I had never had the chance to actually bite into a relatively fresh plum, the way I always thought all fruits should be initially enjoyed.

To be frank, it didn't sit well with me that my first plum experiences had been associated with constipation – whenever I had trouble with you-know-what, my mother would bring home a large pack of prunes and we would stay up until midnight, watching old movies and talking about the past. The prunes, whether it was their reputation or the circumstances under which I ate them, made me feel much older than I actually was. And I knew that that wasn't how fruits are supposed to make a person feel.

Fresh fruits, as far as I could tell, would be the closest thing an infant would have to his or her very first “sweets” experience. Therefore, I had always thought that fruits should invoke a sense of youth, freedom, and simple joys. The feel of the juices bursting in your mouth, preferably dribbling down to the tip of your chin, has a way of making one feel alive and wild and breathlessly careless. To take away that experience of a fruit – at least, to not have that kind of initial experience with a fruit – is a bit of a tragedy.

So one monumental Saturday, when I was fresh out of college and still mooching off my mother for every conceivable thing needed for suburban survival, I wandered over to the fruit section hoping to find some fresh plums. There are no words to describe how I felt when I discovered that that weekend, they were offering a special on plums – marked down prices for plums imported from California. They were passing out sample slices too, but I just went straight for the lovely purplish fruits and bought eight of them using what's left of my allowance.

I was very much aware, of course, that these plums will never be able to measure up to plums eaten straight from being picked. But I understand that I would probably have to move to another country if I want to be able to do that, so I refuse to complain. So instead, I locked myself up in my room, put on Lisa Loeb, and as she sang the words “Bring me wild plums, wild plums and agrimony” I close my eyes and took a huge bite of the smooth plum in my hand.

There are no words to properly describe how biting into it felt. It was firm, the feel of it against my teeth somewhere between like that of an apple or that of a grape. But at the same time, it had not been like biting into an apple or a grape – the skin of the apple does not give so easily as the plum, and the skin of the grape is far too thin to be like that marvelous fruit. The insides of the fruit were also rather unique to my inexperienced teeth and tongue: it was firm, but pulpy, and the flavor was a perfect mix of tangy sweetness that I felt was much better than the kind I enjoy from savoring an apple.

And, as if some strange door had opened in my mind, I remembered an old poem that was once read out to us in class by a favorite professor. It was by a brilliant poet named William Carlos Williams, I believe, and in it, he apologized – quite insincerely – about snacking on the plums that his companion, friend, wife or girlfriend had been saving for breakfast. And I thought at that moment that perhaps I sympathized with William Carlos Williams under those circumstances.

I took another bite. And then another, and then another. Eventually, I finished off all eight of the plums, their juices staining the perimeter of my mouth, bits of their skin painting the lines between my teeth. And I felt, for the first time since I graduated, like I was alive.

Since my first bite into a fresh plum, I had actually come to love plums in all their incarnations – yes, even dried and pruned. Perhaps it is because I have come to know the fruit as it was meant to be, with very little interference from humanity. Whatever the reason, eating plums has become a kind of ritual for me – on days when I am low, I would, quite selfishly, lock myself up in a room, close my eyes, and bite with all the anticipation of the hungered.

## About the Author

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