

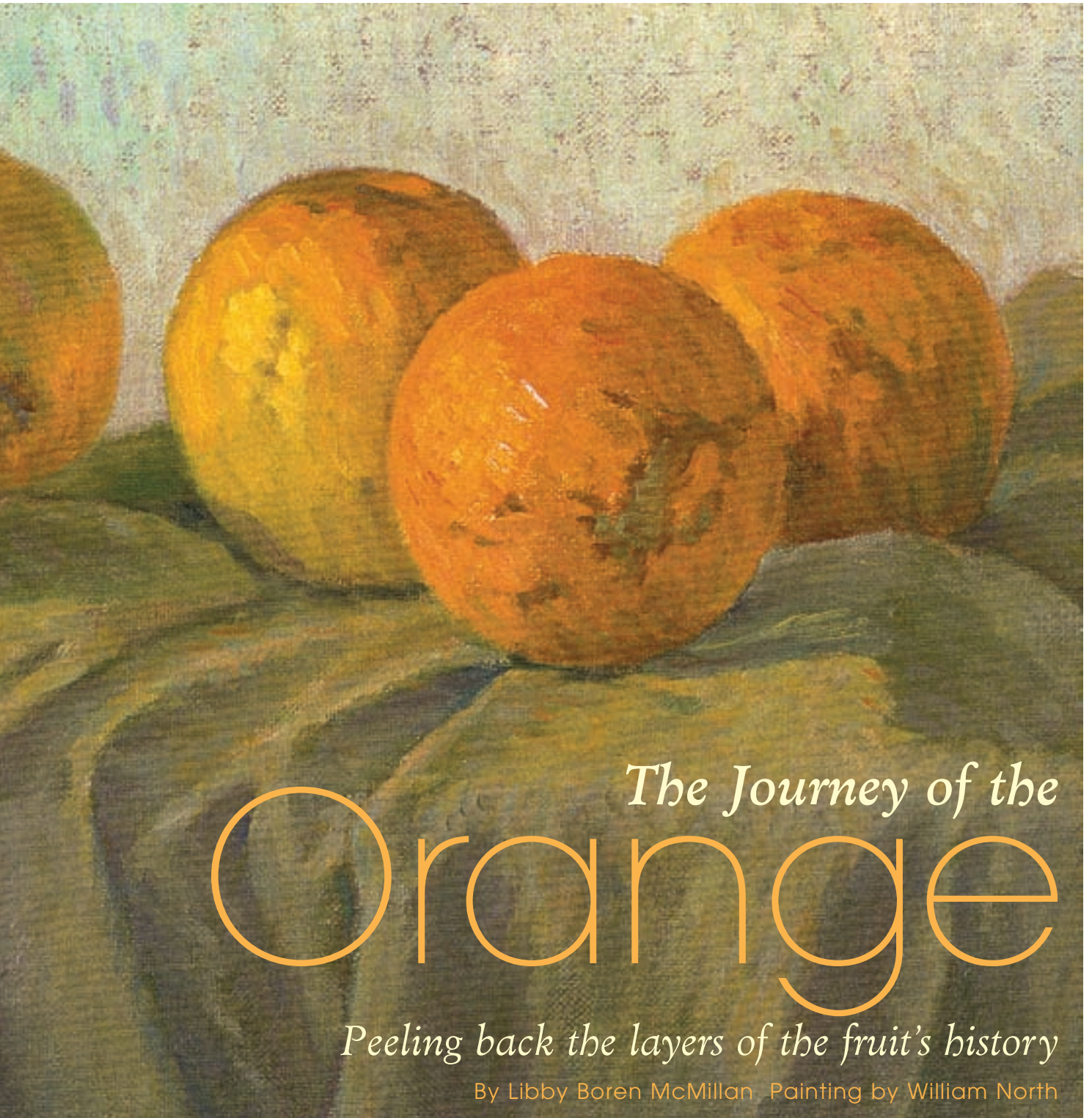


Florida's iconic fruit, the orange, has a past that gives new meaning to the word "juicy." We've attempted to slice through the many theories of how and where the orange originated. Along the way, we turned up several pulpy facts about one of the world's most beloved foods.

It was about eight thousand years ago, in the geographic region stretching from Iraq to India, that the world's original citrus fruit was born. The citron was adored by Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Romans, and Persians and was raised for its aroma as well as for purposes ranging from embalming to creating aphrodisiacs to protecting against poisons.

A popular Jewish symbol in ancient times, the citron appeared on graves, coins, and synagogues. It was the Jews, in fact, who planted the citron across the Roman Empire's Mediterranean region (Spain, Italy, Sicily, northern Africa, and Turkey). One theory holds that the Romans eventually commissioned Jewish gardeners to use citron as grafting stock to develop a sweeter fruit, leading to the creation of the orange. Do a little research, however, and you'll discover that Southeast Asia, India, and southern China are also credited as the birthplace of the orange.





The Journey of the
Orange

Peeling back the layers of the fruit's history

By Libby Boren McMillan Painting by William North





One thing everyone agrees on: As man explored or conquered new territories, the orange blazed new trails alongside him. Invading Moors likely brought the fruit from northern Africa to Spain as early as the year 711. And in the fifteenth century, European visitors on a sweeter mission brought sweeter fruit; Portuguese traders, returning from India, replaced bitter Persian oranges with their newest tasty find.

It was, in fact, early sailors who happily discovered that oranges prevented scurvy, and from that moment on, seamen of Spanish, Dutch, Arab, and Portuguese heritage planted them along trade routes. An Italian sailor by the name of Cristoforo Columbo brought the first orange seeds to the Caribbean in 1493. It was Ponce de León, however, who is widely thought to have introduced Florida to the orange a hundred years later. De León was an early orange advocate, commanding that every man on his crew plant one hundred seeds each time their ship landed. By the 1700s, Seminole Indians were utilizing de León's wild groves and helped oranges expand their reach to Central Florida.

The Growth of an Industry

Change has been constant in the world of oranges. It was at a Brazilian monastery in 1820 that a mutation within the grove led to what is known today as the navel orange. In the early 1870s, that new orange made its way to Riverside, California, where Eliza Tibbets was given three branches by a

friend at the U.S. Department of Agriculture who knew of her prowess in the garden. A few years later, the



A precursor to the orange, the citron is still used as a symbol during the Jewish celebration of Sukkoth.

trees borne of that gift produced fruit, and today we are all allegedly eating descendants of the navel oranges originally nurtured by Tibbets's green thumb. One of her original trees, in fact, still thrives.

Incidentally, navel oranges get their name for reasons obvious upon inspection. Just below the "navel" of the orange lies a hidden "twin fruit," the product of the aforementioned mutation. The small interior "twin fruit," opposite the stem, is what gives

this orange its own belly button.

Our orange research also turned up a William Wilfskill, who is credited with planting the first orange tree in Los Angeles around 1841. Again, the trends and travels of modern man pushed the orange to new heights and in new directions. Gold rush hopefuls made for solid orange sales in California, and by 1877, Wilfskill was able to ship his oranges to St. Louis on the brand-new transcontinental railroad.

During the nineteenth century, Florida also developed its own booming citrus business, which today is a billion-dollar industry. A name familiar to Southwest Floridians is inextricably tied to the orange.

The late, colorful Ben Hill Griffin, Jr. focused his early attentions on a ten-acre grove, a wedding gift from his father. Griffin, who dropped out of the University of Florida as soon as he'd taken all of the school's agricultural courses, had apparently paid attention in class. When he died in 1990, his net worth was estimated at more than \$300 million, and Florida's "orange juice baron" controlled 275,000 acres of citrus and cattle



Due to a mutation, navel oranges have a small interior "twin fruit" that gives the appearance of a belly button.





From a packing facility in Leesburg (far left) to a grove in Cocoa (left), citrus operations were located throughout the Sunshine State during the twentieth century; the late Ben Hill Griffin, Jr. (below) was known as Florida's "orange juice baron."

operations in Central Florida. The stadium at the University of Florida bears his name, and while we don't know if it's true, we'd like to think you can buy a little OJ at halftime.



Although our state is now filled with sweet-smelling orange groves, Florida's Indian River area is uniquely suited to the crop. The region, just a few miles from the Atlantic Ocean, has optimal weather and soil. Oranges grown here are famous for being the sweetest and juiciest in Florida. Because cool nights are necessary to turn an orange from green to a bright orange hue, Indian River oranges have an advantage, with the Atlantic Gulf Stream so nearby.

But don't be fooled by a green orange. Our warmer climate generally

Because the state's warmer climate can prevent orange rinds from "setting," a green orange that was grown in Florida may be perfectly developed on the inside.

prevents orange rinds from "setting." So a green orange that was grown in Florida may well be perfectly developed on the inside. It is that natural prejudice for orange oranges, however,

that has made Florida a juice capital. While our crops are sweeter than California's, those West Coast oranges look more like people think they're supposed to. (Growers in Florida and Texas sometimes enhance their fruit skins with dyes, and mark them as such, in order to sell them in the marketplace.)

Today, oranges can be found growing

America, Mexico, California, Texas, Arizona, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean Rim, Israel, southern Asia, and Australia. Brazil leads the world in production; Florida comes in second, producing three times the number of oranges that California does.

Complexities & Characteristics

In a botanical sense, oranges are astounding, complicated fruits. The fruit prefers one side of the tree to another, a fact that must make growers a little bit nuts. Citrus fruits, as a whole, present hosts of peculiarities. Lime seeds can produce oranges, while orange roots can produce lemons (as most in Florida do). All are considered berries. And much to the bees' dismay, navel oranges are produced without pollination.

Farmers across the country grow the tiny mandarin orange, which also boasts an illustrious history. Native to Southeast Asia, the mandarin was taken to Europe by cultivation enthusiasts. Italy's mandarin groves were thriving by 1850, and about that time, the "China Mandarin" was shipped to the Italian Consulate in New Orleans, where it was planted. From there, it made its way to Florida. A Dr. Magee



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of Riverside, California, (no doubt an acquaintance of Eliza Tibbets) sent two seedlings of a different variety to Winter Park, Florida. Mandarins are now commercially grown in Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Texas, Georgia, and California.

The Road Ahead

What's next for the orange? If history were any indication, one could imagine groves in

space; oranges are already a standard provision aboard the International Space Station. The fruit's popularity only seems to grow. Ft. Myers's own Sun Harvest Citrus packinghouse, at the intersection of Six Mile Cypress and Metro parkways, has become a popular regional attraction by offering free juice samples, orange yogurt, bags of citrus to ship or carry home, and even seasonal tours of the packing plant, which gets its fruit from Indian River groves.

On the Sun Harvest Web site, we found tips for selecting oranges. Look for a shiny, blemish-free skin. A heavy orange signals juice, while lighter



Mandarins (left) are just one of the kinds of oranges grown in Florida; (inset) Tropicana has been producing orange juice in Bradenton for some fifty years.



oranges have more pulp and skin. Small navels indicate an orange that was not overripe when picked. Sun Harvest also advises that oranges be

stored in a cool place, but not in the fridge.

While orange juice is a commodity so important it's traded on the New York Stock Exchange, other orange products abound. Orange oil, the result of pressing the peel, is used in foods and beverages as well as by spas and perfumeries. Caribbean natives have long split oranges in half to clean

floors; modern manufacturers agree that the fruit makes great cleaning products. Orange oil contains a natural, environmentally friendly solvent, which aids in grease removal, furniture conditioning, and hand cleansing. And it smells pretty good too.

From a dietary standpoint, oranges are pure gold. They contain no fat, no cholesterol, no sodium, a little calcium, and lots and lots of vitamin C. Chefs sometimes use a zester to incorporate tiny bits of rind into their favorite dishes; its taste is similar to the inner orange but also offers texture. In recipes calling for sliced oranges, the use of Valencia, navel, or blood varieties is recommended. (Bloods, with their red pulp, create high drama at the table.)

Aficionados anxiously await each season's orange blossom honey. If

Oranges by the Numbers

- 0—Number of words that rhyme with orange
- 10—Number of sections (carpels) usually found in a sweet orange
- 14—The Louis who hung tapestries of oranges in the halls of Versailles
- 18.5—Percent of world's oranges produced in Florida
- 1880—Year the state's first citrus nursery opened in Tampa
- \$20,000,000—Amount donated to the University of Florida by Ben Hill Griffin, Jr.
- 24,000,000—Boxes of oranges lost due to 2005's Hurricane Wilma (13 percent of Florida's crop)
- \$1,168,211,000—Value of Florida's orange crop in 2002
- 1,200,000,000—Gallons of juice produced in Florida during the 2002-2003 season



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Many Floridians have a fondness for the scent of citrus blossoms.

you've been lucky enough to chance upon a blossoming orange tree or—pure bliss—an entire grove in bloom, that memory will come flooding back with a taste of orange blossom honey.

Other flavors that beautifully accompany orange include mint, chocolate, almond, and cinnamon. The French macerate and distill orange rinds before adding them to cognac and sugar syrup to produce Grand Marnier's Cordon Rouge. Floridians, on the other hand, might think more readily of triple sec, an orange liqueur used in margaritas. OJ blends delightfully with vodka, tequila, and champagne. The simplest drink? Poke a hole in your orange, pour in a little liquor of choice, insert straw, and sip.

Hmmm...better go see if your neighbor has any green oranges he's about to pitch. 🍊

Libby Boren McMillan has a unique association with Florida's famous fruit. She attended the University of Oklahoma, where football fans, filled with visions of another Orange Bowl trip, often celebrated touchdowns and field goals by lofting citrus orbs onto Owen Field.

SIDEBAR IMAGES COURTESY OF WILLIAM NORTH

Oranges as Fine Art

Artist William North reveals the true nature of Florida's finest fruit

William North is a distinguished painter of the tropical Florida scene. He carries on the tradition of the great age of Impressionism; working from life, he captures landscapes in the field and paints still lifes in the studio.

North discovered Florida oranges as a subject for his work soon after moving to Ft. Myers in 1990. Looking for new material for his still life paintings, he visited a local produce stand.

There he found Florida juice oranges unlike any representations of the fruit he had ever seen. They were not perfectly round, they were not perfectly orange, and they did not look like the glamorized images found on juice cartons and posters.

The oranges varied in shape and color, combining hues of green, tan, orange, and brown. They also were often covered with surface markings. Some were speckled and dimpled. Others had unusual designs and patterns on their skins caused by wind scars, occurring when twigs or branches brush against the fruit as it develops on the tree.

These observations



Artist William North paints Florida juice oranges as they truly appear, complete with blemishes, discolorations, and wind scars.

inspired North to create an extensive series of oil paintings that capture the fruit in its natural state. Each image became a portrait of particular oranges, handpicked from the produce bin or the tree. His choice of fruit also changed with the seasonal harvest to include Valencias, temples, Hamlins, navels, and honeybells. Visits to orange groves soon inspired him to add grove landscapes to his subject matter.

North's still lifes and grove paintings were first shown at the 1997 Citrus Expo, a trade show cosponsored by the Gulf Citrus Growers Association and Citrus

Industry magazine. There, his paintings attracted considerable attention and critical acclaim from grove owners and others serving the industry, as they had never seen an artist portray oranges that looked like the real thing.

In Florida, North has received numerous awards, including a prestigious first place in the Winners Circle competition at Edison College in Ft. Myers. His paintings hang in hundreds of collections in the United States and abroad, as far afield as Moscow and Tokyo.

For more information on the fine art of William North, visit www.northgallery.com.

—Suzanne LaBounty

