

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz · 12 hours ago · 4 min read

Cherries



*When better cherries are not to be had,
We needs must take the seeming best of bad.*

Samuel Daniel

I never ate cherries during my childhood and adolescence. Cherry trees do not grow in Cuba and, if there were imported cherries for sale anywhere, they would have been available only at the supermarkets for the very rich; I, a member of a working-class family, never set foot on one of those establishments. I of course knew what cherries were and was familiar with the maraschino cherries that came in glass jars and

were used for decorating cakes and ice cream; but I never cared much for those confections, which tasted only of sugar, a product of which we had an excessive supply in my country.

My first consumption of a real cherry was some time after my arrival in Miami, when I was served a slice of cherry pie at someone's dinner party. The cherries made the pie delicious, but in themselves were only mildly interesting. I later learned that the cherries used for baking are sour cherries, not intended to be consumed alone the way grapes or strawberries are. This distinction remained dormant in my mind for many years, since feasting on cherries is something unfamiliar for those of us in the Latin culture. In tropical countries like mine, there is a plethora of exquisite local fruits to caress the palate (mangoes, bananas, pineapples, guavas, papayas, mameyes, soursops, coconuts, limoncellos, oranges, and so on) without having to resort to imports from temperate climates.

It was only after I left Florida and moved to the Midwest that I was forced to get accustomed to partaking of the colder climate fruits. I embraced apples, pears, peaches, and apricots with varying degrees of enthusiasm, none approaching my predilection for the tropical fruits that, at the time (1970s) were not generally available in America except in specialty stores. Some of those temperate weather fruits (apples, pears, and grapes) could be stored for a long time thanks to their suitable skin thickness, sugar content, and firmness. Others (like peaches) were only available on a seasonal basis and required freezing or canning in syrup or juice to be available at other times of the year.

Then there were the sweet cherries. I discovered them when I lived in Ohio; I became addicted to them immediately, but learned that they are only available in the summer months, for they are prohibitively expensive to can because they are typically picked, pitted, and processed by hand. Cherries can be frozen, but they are never the same once they are thawed: they become soft and mushy, making them unappetizing.

For those reasons, I became an avid searcher for fresh cherries, as they appeared during a very short period that roughly coincides with the summer months. I found them first in June; by late August, they had disappeared from the produce aisles of the supermarkets.

Over the years, I developed one of the habits that inform my life. Twice a week or so, starting on the Summer Solstice and lasting until Labor Day, I will have a "cherry breakfast" consisting of a bowl of Bing cherries, a wedge of Brie, a handful of whole wheat crackers, and a few pieces of cut pineapple. Each mahogany-red cherry will deliver a rich jolt of sweet flavor that will fill my mouth for a few seconds, just enough to last until a bite of cheese and a crumbling cracker make me ready for the next fruit. For it is impossible to eat just one cherry if there are others still lingering in the bowl. Cherries are small tastes of paradise; their memory

will carry me at least through lunch time.

Like all good things in life, cherry breakfasts are intense but evanescent pleasures. Come the Fall Equinox, all cherries are gone and I must use imported mangoes, Bosc pears, or Honeycrisp or Gala apples in my fruit breakfasts. The replacements are all fine fruits, but their memory is gone the moment I leave the breakfast table. I must wait, with increasing impatience, until the warm days of summer return and the almost forgotten memory of last year's cherries is revived when the first plastic boxes of the new crop appear, just as school is over and the neighborhood pools reopen.

As years passed and insidious poundings of arthritis announced the onset of old age, my cherry breakfasts acquired a new, deeper significance. Each June I would greet the sight of a new crop of cherries with a mixture of relief and gratitude, as good friends gone on a perilous trip abroad who are now making a joyful return. My blood sugar levels have increased, but I am thankful that fruits have not been outlawed the way cakes, cookies and chocolate pies have been banished. I would, of course, be prepared to defy the medical prohibitions and keep consuming my beloved cherries even in the face of a possible diabetic attack.

A new disquiet now arises in my mind. As September closes in on me and cherries exit for another year, I will ask myself: "Will I be around to greet these cherries when they return?" For, short of a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions, cherries will be available again when the heat of summer returns, but will I be able to greet them?

I pen these words one September 18. Today, my supply of cherries was exhausted and no replacements were available. I was almost unable to eat the last, solitary cherry in the bowl: the concert was over, no encores remained to be heard, the last page of the novel had been reached. I shed a tear, already feeling a pang of nostalgia for another chapter in my life closing. But, as I moved on to the rest of my day, I was left with two consoling thoughts: first, that with a bit of luck I will come back another summer to greet my dear friends upon their return; and, most important, they will be here in any case to make life more pleasant for the rest of us mortals.

END

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz is a Cuban American engineer and lawyer who, having retired from the practice of law, rediscovered the pleasures of creative writing. In addition to fiction in both English and Spanish, he has written papers on issues relating to Cuba and miscellaneous other topics. His memoir, *CUBAN TRANSPLANT*, was published earlier this year by Story Sanctum Publishing. You can find him @ matiastraviesodiaz.com.

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