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Ancient ritual

With slow, gentle persimmon persuasion, the tradition of hoshigaki continues

By Mike Dunne -- Bee Food Editor

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In a shed behind a produce stand in Granite Bay, the heads of electric fans are twisting back and forth, stirring the dry air.

They look like commanding officers barking orders across ranks of soldiers lined up before them.

The "soldiers" are persimmons, row upon row, each dangling from a short length of string draped over a fir slat.

As the fans blow, the persimmons sway, shrinking and darkening by the day.

They represent an autumn ritual again under way on family farms scattered along the western foothills of Placer County.

It's the Japanese art of hoshigaki - transforming fresh persimmons into dried - "hoshi" for dried, "gaki" from "kaki," for persimmon.

On this farm, Otow Orchards, Tosh Kuratomi has just come down a ladder after rolling up a tarp that had been protecting battalions of persimmons.

"Mold is our biggest enemy," says Kuratomi, a former teacher who talks of hoshigaki in the considered tones of the classroom.

He's slight and dark, his thick black hair streaked here and there with silver strands. He's wearing large sunglasses and a baseball cap.

He darts into another outbuilding, returning with a persimmon that is nearly finished drying. Small and dark brown except for a light and sparkly coating of sugar, it looks leathery, but yields easily to the bite. Delicately sweet and cinnamony, it is the concentrated essence of persimmon.

Hoshigaki connoisseurs prize dried persimmons that are whole, unblemished and more smooth than wrinkled, their frosty sugar bloom delicate and uniform. While hoshigaki can be chopped and added to cookies and cakes or used as a topping on rice cakes, it customarily is eaten on its own as a snack or dessert.

Kuratomi, his wife, Christine, their son, Toshio, Christine's mother, Helen Otow, and a few other workers are involved in producing hoshigaki, a slow, deliberate, hands-on process that generally takes three to six weeks for each persimmon.

An intermittent drizzle can stall the air-drying for days; a steady and dense fog could destroy the

crop.

The season commences with the start of harvest in October and continues well into December. Early in January, all the persimmons will have been sold locally or shipped to Hawaii, Japan, Las Vegas and Los Angeles, the principal markets for Placer County hoshigaki.

Getting the personal touch

Each grower has his own way of making hoshigaki, the final product varying in size, texture, flavor and appearance.

At Otow Orchards, Rodrigo Betancourt harvests most of the fruit. He grasps each hard, bright persimmon and twists it from the branch so a short and stubby stem protrudes from each piece of fruit.

In a nearby cabin, his wife, Veronica, uses a paring knife to lop off the crown, leaving the calyx and stem intact and trimming the shoulders until they are as flat as a calm sea.

Switching to a vegetable peeler, Veronica peels each persimmon in less than 10 seconds, slips of orange ribbon falling into an old detergent bucket at her feet.

She returns the persimmons to their lug box and delivers them outside to Helen Otow, who is sitting in the sunshine on an upturned crate. Otow deftly ties an 8-inch loop of string to a stem, repeats the procedure with the other end of the twine and a second persimmon, and then drapes the pair over a slat. They must be balanced so one persimmon is slightly higher than the other. If they were to touch, soft spots could develop at the points of contact, leaving them susceptible to the onset of mold.

Otow then dips back into the nest of strings in front of her. The loops look as if they've been through this before, and they have. "It takes more time to cut and tie together new ones than to clean up the old," she says.

Otow has been putting up hoshigaki "50 or 60 years, as long as I can remember." In all that time, the method has changed little.

"The younger generation thinks of new ways to do things," she says, tying together two more persimmons. "But this part is always the same."

So is the next step - the gentle massaging of each persimmon.

The first kneading occurs a few days after the fruit is hung to dry. The massages will be repeated as many as a dozen times before each persimmon, after passing through a stage where it looks and feels like a water balloon, gradually shrivels into something like a date.

The intent of the squeezing is threefold: To break up and leave uniform the interior flesh; to stretch and smooth the exterior, thereby avoiding the formation of moisture-trapping creases that foster mold; and to encourage the movement of fructose to the outside, where it forms a white coating that can range from small granular crystals like table sugar to a dusting as powdery as confectioners' sugar.

It's a totally natural process, with no artificial preservatives.

During this year's hoshigaki season, Tosh Kuratomi and his family and crew expect to pick, skin, tie, hang and massage some 15,000 persimmons.

"It takes about 6,000 pounds of (fresh) persimmons to make 1,500 pounds of hoshigaki," says

Kuratomi, who tends 6 acres of the fruit on his nearly 40-acre spread.

The acorn-shaped hachiya - the dominant variety of persimmon grown in the foothills - accounts for most of the hoshi-gaki. A half-dozen other varieties also are cultivated in the region and also may be processed into hoshigaki. Kuratomi is partial to the gyombo variety, convinced that it yields a sweeter version of hoshigaki. It constitutes just 20 percent of his crop, however.

Hoshigaki is expensive - this year, most of the local product is expected to be priced between \$12 and \$15 a pound - but farmers aren't getting rich. Kuratomi once calculated that he made about \$1.50 an hour putting up hoshigaki.

Perpetuating culture

For Kuratomi, hoshigaki at first was a means to preserve and market persimmons he couldn't sell fresh, but now he sees the laborious practice as a way to perpetuate a part of Japanese culture at risk, as well as provide part of his livelihood.

Hoshigaki is experiencing something of a revival in Placer County, prompted primarily by Joanne Neft, director of the county's Agriculture Marketing Program.

Two years ago, Neft drove by a persimmon orchard heavy with unharvested fruit. Depressed prices didn't justify picking the persimmons.

"It was waiting to fall on the ground or be eaten by birds," Neft says. "It was a total waste."

Pondering what she could do to help revitalize the local persimmon market, she remembered that about 15 years earlier a local grower, Martha Miyamura, had introduced her to hoshigaki. This, concluded Neft, could be the answer. She began to urge local persimmon farmers to explore hoshigaki as a way to market their fruit.

"I felt we shouldn't lose hoshigaki," Neft says. "All I had was the idea. The people who are making it are the ones doing the hard work."

Hoshigaki newcomers

Jeff Rieger of Penryn Orchards is one of several growers new to the processing of hoshigaki. Now in his second year of drying persimmons, he's not yet convinced that local residents are willing to pay the prices he feels he needs to continue farming the fruit. Rieger makes a weekly run to the farmers market in Santa Monica to sell his seven varieties of fresh persimmons and his hoshigaki, for which he fetches \$35 per box (10 to a box, approximately one pound).

"Most local producers charge way too little. They've been getting \$7 a pound. This is a lot of work, and that's not worth it," says Rieger, who was tutored in how to make hoshigaki by Tosh Kuratomi. "There's a lot of talk about saving small farms, but people have to step up and buy from the small farmer, and they have to pay a sustainable price."

Last year, a group of graduate students in international agricultural development at the University of California, Davis, completed a study on preserving the Japanese art of hand-drying persimmons in Placer County.

The challenges facing hoshigaki producers, says the 80-page report, range from affordable labor to the loss of agricultural land to suburban development.

Increasing the sale price and diverting sales from wholesalers and retailers direct to consumers could increase profitability, concludes the project. Currently, two-thirds of Placer County's

hoshigaki is sold to wholesalers, with just 6 percent sold directly to consumers at farmers markets, the students found.

A tradition in twilight

If hoshigaki becomes more economically viable, one trend just might be reversed - the exodus of Japanese Americans from the process.

Dan Kajimura's family in Lincoln has been making hoshigaki for nearly 60 years, but their annual output is dwindling and his children show little interest in continuing the custom. They've produced up to 1,600 pounds of hoshigaki in a single season, but this year they aren't likely to make more than 300 pounds.

"We've been cutting down," Kajimura says. "It's just me and my mother, and she's 85. My sons and daughter help a little bit, but the younger generations don't want to do it."

Hiroshi Matsuda, a ceramic and bonsai artist in Newcastle, agrees that demand for hoshigaki persists, but unlike his farming parents, he isn't keen on extending the tradition.

"I wouldn't touch it. The return for the amount of work isn't there," Matsuda says. "If my parents were gone, I might make a handful of it for myself, but I just can't see it as a business."

His parents rarely leave their farm during hoshigaki season. "Even at Thanksgiving, they'll eat and then have to get back. Sometimes I'll bring them dinner; they don't want to go out," Matsuda says. He likens them to winemakers during crush, processing fruit into a distinctive product of which they are immensely proud.

"I think the money part is secondary to them," Matsuda says. "If it isn't, they should raise the price!"

Where to find hoshigaki in the Sacramento area

Some hoshigaki is available now, but most of the crop isn't expected to be ready for another couple of weeks, though damp weather could delay processing of the persimmons. Here are sources:

* Otow Orchards, 6232 Eureka Road, Granite Bay, open 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays. Price expected to be \$12 a pound; (916) 791-1656.

* Newcastle Produce, 9230 Cypress St., Newcastle, open 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays, noon-5 p.m. Sundays. Price is expected to be about \$15 a pound; (916) 663-2016.

* Ikedas California Country Market, 13500 Lincoln Way, Auburn, and 26295 Mace Blvd., Davis, 8 a.m.-7 p.m. daily in Auburn, 9 a.m.-7 p.m. daily in Davis. Price is expected to be around \$11 a pound; (530) 885-4243 in Auburn, (530) 750-3379 in Davis.

* Penryn Orchards, Penryn, phone and e-mail orders only, (916) 769-5462 and jhrieger@sbcglobal.net. Price is \$35 per box, limit six boxes per customer; each box is about one pound and is to include 10 persimmons.

* Brenner Ranch, 5225 Highway 193, Newcastle, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. Also at farmers markets at Sunrise Mall on Saturdays, Country Club Plaza on Saturdays, Eighth and W streets in Sacramento on Sundays. Price is expected to be around \$20 a pound; (916) 663-4578.

* Blue Goose Produce, 3550 Taylor Road, Loomis, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, with schedule to extend to Sundays starting next week. Price is expected to be \$12 a pound; will ship for additional charge; (916) 652-8341.

* S. Kajimura Farms, 2920 Garden Bar Road, Lincoln 95648, sells most of its hoshigaki to wholesalers, but will take individual mail orders for shipping. Price is expected to be \$10 to \$12 a pound, plus shipping fees.

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