



An Acquired Taste

story by Sue Kiyabu

photos by Kevin Cameron

Let's get this out of the way: it's an acquired taste.

You may possess a highly perceptive palate, which delights in the intricate flavor of bittermelon at first bite, but most mortals need repeated exposure to appreciate its unique flavor. The uninitiated may find their taste buds overwhelmed by the aptly named bittermelon's initial assault. This is a food with an attitude, beloved by many Island families but rarely encountered on the menus of four-star restaurants.



A member of the gourd family, bittermelon is a relative of many exotic vegetables. Grown in tropical regions around the world, it resembles a thick, mint-green, warty cucumber (a distant cousin). The plant's seeds, vines and leaves are edible, but the melon itself is most often the key ingredient. At first, its bitterness may be concealed by the richness of fried batter or the saltiness of black bean sauce or the spiciness of curry, but then it comes into its own, first at the back and sides of the tongue and then, more lingeringly, on the palate. It's not for culinary cowards.



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Bittermelon (*Momordica charantia*) is known as ampalaya in the Philippines, where it's used in pinakbet, a traditional vegetable-based stew from the north. In China, it's called ku gua and stuffed with pork and steamed. In Sri Lanka, it's karawila, made into curries or chutney. In Denmark, it's sliced thin and used as a garnish in salads. In Japan, it's often pickled. In Okinawa, goya is a culinary jewel. It's not only a pivotal component in the national dish champuru, which consists of pork (or Spam), tofu and bittermelon, it's also made into beer, chips, candy and tea. There is even a television show, *Churasan*, that features a toy called "goya man."



Bonnie Miyashiro studied dance and music in Okinawa. She says she "loves bittermelon" and eats it regularly. But it was not love at first bite. Born and raised in Hawai'i, Miyashiro didn't grow up eating the gourd, and its robust flavor didn't find followers in her immediate family. In Okinawa, where bittermelon is plentiful, ubiquitous and inexpensive, she grew accustomed to its taste. "My relatives would slice it and cook it in a tempura," says Miyashiro, who now works at the Hawaii Okinawa Center. "It's just getting used to it, because at first it's like, 'gross,' but after a while, you acquire a taste for it."

Or you can embrace it.

"Usually, for people who like bittermelon, the more bitter, the better," says Grant Murata, a chef at Asahi Grill. Murata grew up in Hawai'i but has steeped himself in Okinawan culture. His wife is Okinawan. He's well-known in the community as a top-notch player of the Okinawan sanshin, a traditional three-stringed instrument. His knowledge of the fruit grew from his interest in the culture.

He's experimented with bittermelon—making not only Okinawan dishes but Filipino interpretations, too. Rather than trying to tame its nature, Murata accepts it. But he says, even in Okinawa, a place where bittermelon is revered, bittermelon is becoming less bitter. "Because of the high influx of Japanese tourists to Okinawa, they are growing a hydroponic bittermelon that's easier on the palate," he says. "But the old people who live in Hawai'i, they remember the other bittermelon, and some say that's not how they remember it."

Humans are hard-wired to avoid bitter flavors. It's a natural defense mechanism. We come out of the womb with a fondness for sweet and a slight aversion to bitter. But because of the complexity of our brains, we are the only mammal with the ability to get over it, according to the National Bitter Melon Council (NBMC). Many familiar and appealing foods are inherently bitter: radicchio, artichokes, coffee, chocolate. An element of bitterness can help bring a dish into balance and strengthen its character. In the case of bittermelon, when properly prepared and in combination with the right ingredients, the bitterness acts like a catalyst, bringing out the sweetness of other ingredients; it can cut through greasy and fatty foods, take the sting out of hot foods and add intensity to a sauce.



Bittermelon's bitterness comes from the alkaloid momordicine, an organic compound that increases in concentration as the fruit ages on the vine. A flavor this resonant is not seduced by a dash of cream or tamed by a little sugar.

One East Coast chef, who created a three-course menu utilizing bittermelon, characterized its taste this way: "Bittermelon ... It's like a wild stallion. You have to beat it into submission."

There are others working to pacify bittermelon's untamed nature. Grant Sato, who teaches Asian Pacific cuisine at Kap'olani Community College, has been experimenting with bittermelon to make it more palatable. He's created a bittermelon ice cream, used it in a cream sauce, pickled it, made bittermelon pasta and seared fish crusted with bittermelon. Sato says choosing younger fruits (lighter green) will result in a less bitter flavor. Slicing it thinly and soaking it in salted water helps. Rubbing salt into the melon—like you would an eggplant—draws out the bitter flavor. Sato also utilizes bittermelon tea (goja tea), which consists of dried and pureed bittermelon. He says it makes a good base for ice cream and sauces and is so mild it can be directly sprinkled on foods as a garnish.

"It's part of my heritage and my upbringing," says Sato, who is of Okinawan descent. "Growing up, I had a hard time stomaching a lot of the bittermelon dishes. But I know that it has a medicinal value, so I tried to figure out ways to incorporate it into the cuisine without that bitter flavor."

In fact, bittermelon boasts a panoply of purported healthful benefits. It is rich in iron, contains twice the beta-carotene of broccoli, twice the calcium of spinach and twice the potassium of bananas, according to the NBMC. It also has vitamins A, C, B1 to B3, phosphorus and dietary fiber. It's long been used worldwide to heal a number of ills. Many cultures consume bittermelon as a tonic for malaria. It's also widely eaten for skin problems and intestinal disorders. Its most highly touted benefit, however, is its hypoglycemic (blood sugar-lowering) ability. In India, Sri Lanka and Central America, bittermelon is consumed as a treatment for diabetes; while studies have indicated that it does contain anti-diabetic properties, it has not yet been sanctioned by the Food and Drug Administration for medicinal use.

In Hawai'i, bittermelon is easily grown and widely available in local supermarkets. In 2005, twenty farms produced roughly 250,000 pounds—not huge numbers, but still, a lot of people are eating the stuff. It seems to me that bittermelon enthusiasts fall into three categories: You eat it because it's good for you; you relish its bitterness as a cultural (even if its not your culture) gift; or, as a culinary artisan, you see it as a creative challenge. But however they get into it, there's one thing that bittermelon aficionados have in common: They'll all tell you that it's an acquired taste. **HH**