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Bitter melon enlists a neighborhood

The Boston Globe

By Kimberly W. Moy, Globe Correspondent | July 20, 2005

So you thought broccoli had a bad rap.

Andi Sutton probably has one of the hardest food publicity jobs around -- promoting bitter melon. With its grooved, gourd-like appearance, bright green color, seeded flesh, and yes, very bitter taste, the melons are loved by some, and simply too weird for others.

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She is director of public relations for the five-month-old National Bitter Melon Council, an organization formed as part of an art and social research project that looks at life in the South End. Sutton would like bitter melon to have the same following that garlic does at its annual Gilroy, Calif., festival and clams do at their celebration in Yarmouth, Maine. To that end, Sutton has recruited South End eateries, from the local pizzerias to upscale restaurants, to create dishes for Bitter Melon Week, an event that runs from July 22 to 30. But this food fest is unusual. After you try bitter melon at one of the participating restaurants, which include Hamersley's Bistro, Botucatu, Polka Dog Bakery, and B&G Oysters, you can collect a binder cover at a local gallery to create your own melon recipe book.

Bitter melon already has a local connection: The crop is grown in the Berkeley Street community gardens, mostly by Asian gardeners, who consider the bumpy, pale green squash a healthy part of the diet.

Part of the idea is to build a network, said Sutton, 24, who works a "day job" waiting tables at Central Kitchen in Cambridge. She has received mixed reactions but hopes at least 20 restaurants will participate. "I'm encouraging them to think creatively," she said. "It doesn't have to be a star ingredient; it can be a garnish."

Sutton has been doing a bit of testing herself, concocting a bitter melon martini from a syrup she created, and making bitter melon pickles, as well as a bitter melon and honeydew ice cream, in which the bitter flavor cuts away the heavy dairy taste, she said.

Another goal in the project is creating a sense of connection among diners as they experience a mostly new taste together. "Even among Asians, it's foreign enough that you have a lot of opinions about it,"

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said Hiroko Kikuchi, one of the lead artists of "Sifting the Inner Belt," a yearlong effort to examine South End life through projects that include enlisting local restaurants to make dishes with bitter melon.

Priscilla Lee's reaction to the exhibit might be a typical response among the younger generation of Asian Americans. "My mom likes this stuff; I find it a little bitter," said Lee, of Somerville.

In Japan, bitter melon has caught on in recent years, as people latched onto the idea of adopting some of the eating habits of Okinawa, south of Japan's main islands. Okinawans are known to live longer and have a lower incidence of cancer, said Yuko Torigoe, a Chestnut Hill dentist. "In the grocery store, you see all this goya, goya, goya," Japanese for "bitter melon."

The concept of Bitter Melon Week initially surprised Sara Plabutong, manager of Equator restaurant on Washington Street, who grew up in Thailand and somewhat reluctantly ate her mother's bitter melon dishes. "It seemed like the melon everyone forgot," said Plabutong, 38. She wasn't sure how her customers would react to a bitter melon special, "because I knew it was medicine. My mother told me anything that's bitter is medicine."

But she also recalled a soup her mother would prepare, of hollowed-out bitter melon stuffed with a mixture of ground pork, herbs, coriander, black pepper, soy sauce, and a little fish sauce. "As long as she made that soup, I could handle it."

Equator's chef experimented with making a bitter melon version of green papaya salad, spiced with dried shrimp, cherry tomatoes, shredded carrot, ground peanuts, and a sweetened lime dressing. Though it was a little bitter, Plabutong found she could handle that salad too. "I forgot about the bitterness of the bitter melon."

For canine companions, Polka Dog Bakery on Shawmut Avenue will be making treats with bitter melon, peaches, honeydew, cinnamon, "lots of local fresh honey," and spelt flour. Manager Evan Myers, 35, made a similar salad for himself, adding dried cranberries, cilantro, and a vinaigrette of rice wine and blood orange. "I just sliced it up; the flavors all kind of macerate a little bit. And the cilantro really cut down on the bitter taste, because the cilantro has a depth to it," he said.

At Botucatu, a Peruvian-Brazilian restaurant on West Dedham Street, owner Ricardo Villon, 69, last week experimented with sauteing bitter melon with beef, red onions, and tomatoes. He also topped Peruvian spinach-basil pesto and linguini with deep-fried bitter melon rings.

"He said he thinks the key is to mix it with a strong flavor," Sutton said, translating from Spanish, "so that when you chew, the flavors balance each other out."

For a list of participating restaurants, go to www.bittermelon.org. "Sifting the Inner Belt," exhibit runs through July 31 at the Mills Gallery, Boston Center for the Arts, 539 Tremont St., 617-426-8835.

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