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The Great Indian Aam-Bush

So much has been cranked out in the media about the U.S-India nuclear deal during the Bush visit that the story about an agreement that allows the princely Indian mango to be exported to America has been squished in the process. Why just princely, the mango is actually regarded as the King of Fruits in India, although I have heard the royal honorific bestowed on the pineapple in South America and the durian in South East Asia. In truth, the mango is far from princely, since its Hindi appellation "aam," a word that means ordinary, suggests it is a commoners' fruit.

Whether the fruit is royal or common, the U.S-India mango tango touches me in a very personal way, so allow me to get to the core of the issue. My pulp affliction has family roots, a modest holding of a few acres outside Bangalore providing some intimacy to half dozen varieties of the fruit. Unfortunately, enjoyment of the family produce is restricted to summer sorties home, since in American eyes, Indian mangoes belong to the axis of weevil, weevil being a pest that is as anathema to the United States as Saddam and Osama.

Ergo, no Indian mango has been allowed to breach American shores, although legend has it that two U.S varieties, the Haden and Keitt, were derived from a 1945 seedling of Mulgoba, a variety grown mainly in South India. I have known clever Tam-Brahms of South India's curd front sneak in dahi culture in shampoo bottles (and 'thyre'-by hangs a tale), but to the best of my knowledge no one has yet gotten a mango -- plant or fruit -- past the eagle-eyed weevil umpires of U.S Department of Agriculture. Pickles, chutneys, sauces and other concoctions don't count.

As a result, on occasions in the U.S when my thoughts turn to mangoes ("I think, therefore I aam"), I am faced with a supermarket choice between Latin American and Caribbean imports and homegrown American varieties from Florida. At the risk of disrupting this new U.S-India honeymoon, let me say that Tommy Atkins, Duncan, Kent, Ruby etc are not a patch on the langda,

dussehri, chausa and the dozens of choice Indian varieties. Roobish, as Sir Geoffrey would say. Aamchi Alphonso anyway against Jamaican Julie.

So while the family's marginal holdings precludes any possibility of my becoming a mango sheikh, I can't wait to get the first legal crate of mangoes past USDA, defiantly sucking on an aapoos as I stroll past customs and quarantine ("American mangoes suck, dude!")

Even better, I can't wait to see India turn from a basket case to the fruit basket of the world, since we are now among the world's top fruit and vegetable producers with an output of 100 million plus tons (a lot of which wastes because of poor cold storage). That includes some 12 million tons of mango (50 per cent of the world output), 11 million tons of banana, and eight million tons of grapes. Mango, my friends, is just the entrée; wait till we slip the rest across, especially those delicious finger bananas.

But like so much else, it's the Europeans who introduced mango to the new world. According to Wilson Popenoe's 1920 Manual of Tropical and Subtropical Fruits, the name mango comes from the Portuguese word manga, but they probably picked it up from South India where mango is called manga, mangai or mavinkai. About the fruit's desi provenance, there is little doubt. Its botanical name is mangifera indica (indica in italics). Getting the originals across to the United States will be India's just desserts.
