

SMART MOUTH

Looking for a date? This is the place.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

A couple of hours east of Hollywood, it should come as no surprise to find people talking about blondes, brunettes, a movie and romance. It's just a little disconcerting when you realize that the topic of conversation is a fruit.

Earlier this year, I visited Shields Date Garden in Indio, Calif., the heartland of date farming, about 30 miles east of Palm Springs. Some people know Shields because it's been around for ages — Floyd Shields opened for business in 1924. Others know the name because it's among the largest date producers and retailers, growing and selling a dozen varieties — including two hybrid dates that Floyd developed, called the Blonde and the Brunette. But often, people stop at Shields simply because they're lured inside. Along Highway 111 stands a giant knight holding a shield and pointing passersby toward the store. Outside the building, a large sign promotes the film that's screened every 15 minutes: "The Romance & Sex Life of the Date."

I was especially vulnerable to the date hype. For decades, my grandmother, who lives nearby, has talked about date shakes. After all, 95 percent of the country's dates are said to be grown here in the Coachella Valley. There's even an annual date festival (although today it seems to celebrate monster trucks more than fruit). I didn't have any particular fondness for the date, but I also had no reason to snub it. So I surrendered to the world of the small wrinkly fruit, relatives in tow.

We started at the outdoor cafe, where we sat under umbrellas and date palms. (My uncle assured me — a true East Coaster — that not all palm trees look alike.) The cafe opened in 2010, and it looks out on 12 acres of trees, which yield about 50,000 pounds of fruit a year. (Most Shields dates are grown on a nearby farm.)

The menu includes breakfast all day and lunch starting at 10



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

At Shields Date Garden in Indio, Calif., you can drink a date shake under the palms at the outdoor cafe.

a.m. There are specialties such as date pancakes, a burger with sauteed dates, a pulled pork sandwich with a zesty date barbecue sauce, and dates stuffed with jalapeno, blue cheese and prosciutto. Then there are the desserts — date cinnamon roll, date sticky bread pudding and a sweet date tamale — served, naturally, with date coffee. You can add dates to any menu item, and I'm convinced after sampling a couple of imaginative combinations that dates are tasty on just about everything.

We ordered lunch and a large date shake (\$3.50) to split among us. It was so delicious and rich that I figured it must represent a day's worth of calories. But I found out later that the average-sized date has only 23 calories. The shakes are made with Shields Date Crystals, which are tiny bits of dried dates, invented by Floyd

Shields as a sort of sugar substitute. Then there's ice cream and milk for a total of about 350 calories. But who's counting?

After lunch, we went inside, where there's a store that looks as if it hasn't changed much in decades, a movie theater and a long counter where visitors sit and order shakes. No matter where you are, you can hear the buzzing of the blender.

At first glance, the shop looks like a typical tourist trap, with everything from date T-shirts to cactus jelly. But as I paused in the aisles, I began to appreciate the allure of this little fruit. First, I was amazed by all the different shades and sizes — the appearance seems to vary as much as it does in olives. Dates can be black, the color of root beer, or as light as a latte. And I was fascinated by all the date products. One of the

DETAILS

Shields Date Garden

80-225 U.S. Hwy. 111
Indio, Calif.
800-414-2555
www.shieldsdategarden.com
Store hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.
Cafe: 6:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. daily.



BIGSTOCK



Shields sells dates in every variety and form, from baked goods, above, to tasty liquid concoctions, below.



dle East. At one point, date shops lined the highway from Palm Springs to Indio.

I also learned that the trees have almost no root system, and they suck up water — 80 gallons per tree every week — like a straw. There are 48 female trees and one male per acre. Permanent ladders are installed on the trees. Each February and March, farmers take the pollen from male trees and hand-pollinate females. The fruit, about 200 to 300 pounds per tree, is harvested from August through December.

After the movie, I went back to the store, where you can sample all the dates. I tried the Medjool, the largest variety, which tasted sweet and almost creamy. I tasted the Blonde and the Brunette, the Honey date and the Halawi, trying to compare all the textures and flavors. After a dozen dates, I found myself in a state of sugary and chewy exhaustion. I remembered my grandmother's warning about not eating too many lest I leave with a stomachache, but I figured it was probably too late. As the blender buzzed in the background, I walked out the door, into the parking lot and toward the knight in shining armor.

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