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Italian Almonds: Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger

By Ari Weinzweig



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I've kind of always hated the taste of almond extract. When I tried Pizzuta almonds for the first time it immediately became clear to me why—the Pizzutas are the flavor that almond extract is supposed to supplant. But it fails because like so many faux foods, the extract just doesn't quite "get it." I think these do. If you like almonds at all, it's worth tasting these. They're more intense, more almondy, more exotic than any other almond I've ever eaten.

It was sitting with Francesco Padova and Frank (Carollo, managing partner from the Zingerman's Bakehouse whose father's family coincidentally came here from Sicily two generations back) that I finally got clear on some of the basics of the almond world and what makes one different than the next. Francesco would know. His family, he told me, "has been in the food for ... forever." In a nutshell (sorry, couldn't resist), the story is that while almost all California almonds are *soft-shelled* and a fair bit of European almonds are *semi-hard-shelled*, the best tasting, most intensely flavored almonds are more often than not of the *hard-shell* varieties. There are very few areas in which these difficult-to-grow but very tasty hard-shelled almonds can still be had, but one of them is the area in which Francesco's family's farm is to be found, the eastern part of Sicily.

"In our area," Francesco told me, "80 percent of product is still the hard shell." "The difference is a 'natural packaging,'" Francesco put forward with a smile. "The more impenetrable is the shell, the more protected is the seed," he said. "Usually the shell determines the yield. The harder the shell the lower

the yield. But also the higher the flavor."

How big is the yield gap? Big. In California the nut makes up about 60 percent of the whole almond. In Sicily, the yield is 18 to 22 percent. That got my attention—with one third the yield for Sicilian almonds, it starts to make sense why the cost is so much higher. "The content of essential oils is different too," Francesco went on. "The softer the shell, the lower the oils. But oils bring flavor. So for baking, when the oil is lower you get a less flaky pastry." This all makes perfect sense now that Francesco has told me, but not being an almond aficionado I just really hadn't given it much thought up until now.

The jewel in the Padova family's almond crown is the varietal known as the Pizzuta. "It's the signature of my family's district," Francesco said with obvious pride. "It's a very delicate tree. It's afraid of cold so it grows naturally near to the coast. You will never find the Pizzuta tree far from the sea. It's the most noble almond, the richest in vitamins and essential oils, and the flavor is milky." All this was borne out in tasting. The almonds really are exceptional. I will pretty safely say that the flavor is inversely related to the yields; while the latter are three times higher in California, the flavor of the Pizzutas from Sicily is a solid three times more interesting. Four days of sun drying (in the shell) intensifies their flavor and reduces their weight further still.

Tasting the Padova family's Pizzutas gave me a whole new avenue of interest into almonds. Like I said, it made me realize what the people who make commercial almond extract were going after when they "invented" it; it's an effort to replicate the unique, almost bitter and not quite sweet subtleties of these sorts of old-style hard-shelled almonds. And ironically, I can see that all the flavor components I don't like in almond extract are actually present in the Pizzuta as well, but here they're outstanding instead of off-putting. In the Pizzuta, the flavors are simply softer, more sensual, more rounded, more real, sort of ... mellifluous and harmonious.

Down the road, I'm sure we'll be working on some special Sicilian almond pastries out at the Bakehouse, but in the moment the main thing is that we've got these almonds on hand so you can have them for your own eating, baking, salads, and sauces. They're great to put out with a bit of cheese or some dried fruit. Good winter snacking, I think. And while it's safe to say that a small bowl of almonds isn't going to alter the balance of the universe or fix up the economy, they are really quite darned delicious, a gift of great culinary value to anyone in your life who's kind of nuts over nuts in particular, traditional foods, and great, unique, authentic flavors.

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