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Ode to the Mangosteen

by Monique Truong • Aug. 13, 2013 • [original](http://www.spoonwiz.com/ode-to-the-mangosteen/) (<http://www.spoonwiz.com/ode-to-the-mangosteen/>)

In April of 2007, my family and I returned to Vietnam for the first time since our departure in 1975. The word “departure” suggests a journey orderly and organized, as if we had boarded an airplane all those years ago for a much anticipated vacation. I was only six years old when we left, and my mother thought it was best to tell me that we were leaving on a pleasure trip. I am now forty-five years old, and I know that people never depart from a war-torn country. They flee. They take with them what they can, which was often only their memories.

When my friend Quang, a fellow Vietnamese American writer, heard that I was finally going back to the country of our birth, he asked, “What are you looking forward to most?”

“Eating a mangosteen,” I answered without hesitation.

Quang knew me well enough to know that I was not joking. I had given him a response honest and true. We had spent countless hours trading recollections, sharp, disjointed and few, of our youth in Vietnam. He knew that my memories were all stored in my mouth.

Dark purple on the outside, the mangosteen is a perfect sphere. It is a fruit that fits nicely inside of a cupped hand or two cupped hands if you are a small child. The thick smooth rind protects a startling white orb composed of segments, as if someone had thoughtfully cut the fruit into wedges just for you. With the texture of a soft kiwi, the mangosteen’s flavor is an arpeggio of sweet and tart. Think of a demitasse of acacia honey brightened with a squeeze of lime juice. Now, think of the floral intensity of a white peach combined with the fresh snap of a slightly under-ripe pineapple.



(http://www.spoonwiz.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/odetothemangosteen_flickr.Vee_Satayamas.jpg)

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For Quang and me, the mangosteen was literally a fruit of memory. The importation to the United States of fresh mangosteens grown commercially in Southeast Asia was until only recently prohibited because their calyxes—the collar of green “leaves” where the sturdy stem meets the rind—could harbor insects. The mangosteens that made it to us here in New York City were frozen solid in order to kill off the pests.

Think of all the flavors that I have attributed to the mangosteen. Now think of wearing a sweater on your tongue as you are eating one.

I had often discussed the merits of the mangosteen with my friend. I had told him that it was my favorite fruit of all time. He knew that I had even inserted the mangosteen into my first novel, *The Book of Salt*. Binh, the novel’s main character, is a young Vietnamese man who lives far away from his country and his language. Binh is a cook and he, like me, stores his past in his mouth. The word mangosteen appears only once in the novel, but as Binh would tell you a word can be a door that allows you in when “the night outside is too cold and dark.”

In April of 2007, when my family and I returned to Saigon—officially Ho Chi Minh City but even there no one called it that—we went to the central marketplace, Cho Ben Thanh. We never made it inside. We were heading toward the market hall’s north gate, Cua Bac, and toward the pungent odors of food and people mingling in the mid-morning heat when we saw the dazzling arrangements of fresh fruits on Le Thanh Ton Street. My eyes wandered over the hills of cartoon bright red and green dragonfruits, the steroidal pomelos, the armored

jackfruits and found the midnight pool of mangosteens. My mother immediately went into barter mode. The ladies in the competing stands assured her that their fruits were the sweetest and their prices the fairest. My mother told them that we had traveled very far to get there and that her oldest daughter had not tasted a real mangosteen in over thirty years. The ladies seemed unimpressed, but then again they were professionals. They could not allow their emotions to get in the way of making a profit. We ended up purchasing so many bags of fruits that even with the five of us we found it difficult to carry them all.

Later that night, as we sat in our extravagantly air-conditioned hotel room with a view of a Saigon that none of us really knew anymore with its twinkling skyscrapers and brightly lit billboards, my mother reminded me that the best way to break through the mangosteen's thick rind was not with a knife but with your hands.

If the mangosteen is truly ripe, then you can squeeze the fruit around its equator until its surface begins to crack and buckle. Then, while holding the bottom half of the fruit firm in one hand, give the top half a quick twist with your other hand, as if you are opening a lid of a jar or twisting a knob that opens a door. The contents of which you know well.

An earlier version of this essay, translated into Italian, was published in D La Repubblica, November 2007, under the title "Mangiare un Mangostano."

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