

## National

# Pomegranate sows seeds of popularity

By Jenn Abelson  
GLOBE STAFF

Supermarkets can't keep pomegranate juices in stock. Farmers can't grow the fruits fast enough. They are everywhere — in shampoo, on lobster dinners, in beer, even on Christmas wreaths.

Hard-to-eat, and until recently fairly obscure, pomegranates have become a national phenomenon. Companies rolled out 450 products this year featuring the rubyseeded fruit, bringing the total to 961 products launched since 2003, according to the Mintel International Group, a market research firm.

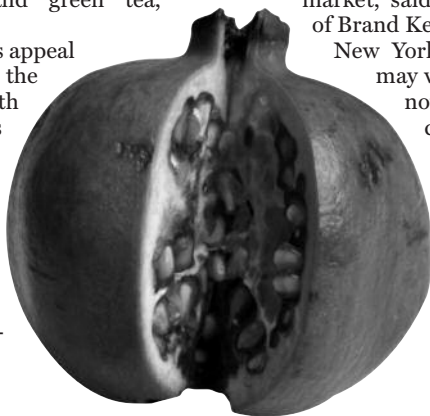
It's an unexpected surge in popularity for a fruit that has its roots in ancient Persia and took nearly 4,000 years to make its way into mainstream America — its arrival epitomized this summer by the introduction of a pomegranate Frappuccino at Starbucks. Rival Dunkin' Donuts wanted to launch a pomegranate smoothie this year, but the Canton chain feared the fruit's short supply would be a problem.

"The pomegranate really did come out of nowhere," said Tom Vierhile, director of Productscan Online, a market research group in Naples, Fla. "Clearly, pomegranate has staked a claim in the market as the top superfruit of the year."

Americans' interest in pomegranates was spurred first by health studies in 2002 promoting the fruit as rich in antioxidants, a class of compounds that are thought to help prevent cancer and strokes. At the same time, Pom Wonderful, a Los Angeles company that helped fund the studies, introduced stylishly bottled pomegranate juice in supermarkets.

The studies gave the fruit instant currency among health-conscious Americans, especially aging baby boomers, and boosted the awareness of the fruit. Marketers quickly crowned the pomegranate as the latest in a new line of nutrient-dense "super foods," following cranberries, blueberries, and green tea, among others.

But the pomegranate's appeal has spread far beyond the bounds of other health foods. Savvy companies played up the fruit's history, revered for centuries as a symbol of fertility, royalty, hope, and abundance in various cultures. Some scholars even suggest that it was a pomegran-



GEORGE RIZLER / GLOBE STAFF

Grocery chains, such as the Stop & Shop at the South Bay Shopping Center, have found it hard to keep the many varieties of pomegranate juices in stock.

ate, not an apple, eaten in the biblical Garden of Eden.

"Ancient Egyptians put them in their tombs, and according to Greek mythology, pomegranates were believed to symbolize fertility because of their many seeds," Dr. Tieraona Low Dog, director of botanical studies at University of Arizona's School of Medicine, said in press materials distributed by Odwalla this year when it launched its PomaGrand brand in three juice varieties.

The pomegranate's lack of history in America also gave companies the freedom to create unusual concoctions.

"There's only so much you can do with tomatoes and the reality of what you can market," said Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys Inc., a consulting firm in New York. "Tomato-flavored vodka may work for brunch, but there's

not a heck lot more where you can take it. But people are willing to experiment with pomegranates, there's no entrenched views of how it should and shouldn't be marketed."

Making the pomegranate more accessible proved to be key to whetting the

American appetite. Eating fresh pomegranates is labor intensive because you must cut through a leathery skin and bitter membrane to reach the hundreds of seeds that make up the fruit.

For Michael S. Moxley, owner of Common Ground Bar & Grill of Allston, pomegranate juice allowed him to offer a whole new line of drinks. Moxley's bar started carrying the juice this year after he received an increasing number of requests.

"I've never seen anything grab on like that, especially when so many people never even heard of it," said Moxley who serves up pomegranate margaritas and other cocktails.

Pom Wonderful, which hired a mixologist to create a pomegranate martini to help generate sales at bars, has expanded its farms over the last few years from several thousand acres of pomegranate trees in California to more than 12,000 acres. And that's still not enough.

Last year, Pom Wonderful stopped supplying pomegranate concentrate to an ice cream company and a salad dressing maker because it needed all the fruit for its own products, including a POM tea launched this year, according to Fiona Posell, a company spokeswoman.

The pomegranate push is certainly paying off: Annual sales of Pom Wonderful's juice jumped to \$80 million over the past year from \$13 million in 2003, according to Informa-

tion Resources Inc., a Chicago market research firm.

"We haven't been able to meet the demand of retailers anywhere," Posell said.

### ANCIENT HISTORY

Learn more about the history of the pomegranate at [boston.com/business](http://boston.com/business)

Indeed, grocery chain Stop & Shop finds it hard to keep pomegranate juices — more than a dozen kinds — in stock. "Our stores run through our supply as quickly as we can deliver it," said Rob Keane, a Stop & Shop spokesman.

Texas A&M University, meanwhile, is working to help farmers cultivate larger commercial pomegranate orchards to cash in on the trend. There currently are only about 10 acres

of pomegranates grown commercially in Texas, but farmers in the state believe they can support more than 10,000 acres.

"We have just as good growing conditions as California, but the crop has been overlooked in the past," said Richard Ashton, who runs Oak Creek Orchard in Brownwood, Texas, and is working with Texas A&M on the pomegranate project. "Not anymore. I get requests from people wanting to get an orchard of pomegranates started nearly every week here in Texas."

The pomegranate craze has even spread to home gardeners. Dave Wilson Nursery, one of California's largest growers of fruit trees, sold about 20,000 pomegranate trees this year — about a 300 percent increase from 2002 — and already has orders through 2008, said Ed Laivo, the nursery's home garden sales and

marketing director. To capitalize on the demand, the company this year introduced five new varieties of pomegranate trees, with such catchy names as Pink Satin, Red Silk, Kashmir Blend, and Garnet Sash.

"The sky is the limit for this fruit. I've never seen such a cultural awareness and desire like this," Laivo said. "I'm not sure where it will stop."

Some market researchers predict that pomegranates will continue to be on the radar but will taper off in popularity with the discovery of the next superfood. One candidate: acai, a dark purple berry grown in the Amazon rainforest that apparently is loaded with antioxidants.

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## Beginner's guide

**What it is:** With its thin, leathery skin and hundreds of ruby seeds, the pomegranate is among the strangest and most labor-intensive fruits available. Most are a deep red and about the size of a softball, grown on shrubby trees native to Iran. These seeds, though perfectly edible, can also be meddlesome. Soft ones are delicious; tough ones are not.

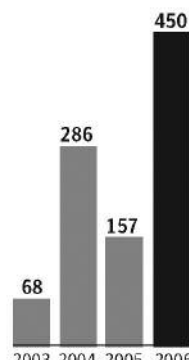
**How to eat it:** Cut the pomegranate in half, pound it firmly (cut side down on a cutting board), and scoop out the pulp-covered seeds, removing the bitter, cream-colored membrane as you go. Eat the seeds and pulp as they are, either out of the halved shell or sprinkled on a dish such as a salad.

**Where to buy it:** Pomegranates are in season from October through January. After they're picked, pomegranates stop ripening. A good rule is to choose pomegranates that are heavy for their size (that means more juice), with bright, blemish-free skin. They will keep for several weeks in the refrigerator.

SOURCE: Globe archives

## New products featuring pomegranate

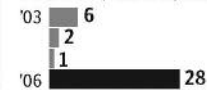
### ALL PRODUCTS



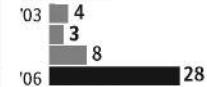
SOURCE: Mintel

### FAST-GROWING CATEGORIES

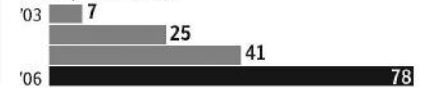
#### DRESSINGS, VINEGAR, MAYONNAISE



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## How the ancient Middle Eastern fruit, the pomegranate got so popular

