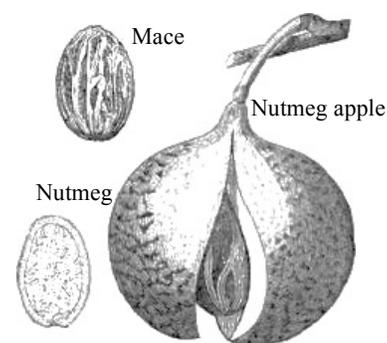


Nutmeg and Mace

Nutmeg and Mace are different parts of the same fruit of the nutmeg tree. The tree is a native of the Moluccas (the Spice Islands) of Indonesia. Nutmeg was known in China and India before the birth of Christ and it arrived in the Mediterranean about 500 AD and then moved north into Europe. By the first Crusade (1095), the spice was already very much appreciated. The Romans used it as incense. It is said that Henry VI, the German King who was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Italy in 1191 by Pope Celestine III, ordered the streets of Rome fumigated with nutmeg for his coronation. During the 16th century, when the spice trade flourished, the Portuguese and then the Dutch, in turn, guarded their spice treasure very jealously, so much so that it was reported that warehouses in Amsterdam, full of nutmeg and mace were burned down in order to keep the price artificially high! In London, nutmeg was sold for about 90 shillings per pound during the 1750s. While the Dutch tried to monopolize their trade (the nutmeg sold whole were dipped in lime to prevent their sprouting), the French and English schemed to obtain fertile seeds for transplantation. In 1765, Pierre Poivre, the French missionary-turned-entrepreneur, smuggled more than 3000 nutmeg seedlings and other fruit trees to Mauritius, where they flourished. The British East India Company introduced the nutmeg tree to the island of Grenada of the West Indies. Along with Indonesia, Grenada is now the main source of nutmeg and mace.

The nutmeg tree is an evergreen with spreading branches and dense foliage, dark bright green on top and pale green underside. It grows up to 18 metres and produces fruits about 10 years after planting. The trees are either male or female and one male tree is required to fertilize 10 female trees and the sex of the tree cannot be determined until it is 5 years old. Once the female tree starts to fruit, it crops for 50 years or longer, bearing up to 2000 fruits per year. There are three harvests, the chief one in summer, the next one in late autumn and the last one in spring. The fruit, called the nutmeg-apple, looks rather like a golden apricot and on ripening, it splits in half, exposing a bright red netlike appendage (called aril) encasing a brown nut. The red arils are the mace, which turns into an orange colour when dry. The nut is also dried until the kernel inside rattles and the shell is then broken with a wooden truncheon and the nutmeg is picked out. In Malaysia and Indonesia, the pulp of the fruit is crystallized or pickled then sliced and sold in packs of delicious, tangy confections. The flavour of nutmeg and mace is similar, gloriously aromatic, sweet and warm, nutmeg being slightly sweeter, mace more aromatic.



Whole blade of mace

Mace is sold either as whole "blade" or as the ground spice. Nutmeg is also sold whole seed or ground. The hard dried seed may be kept in an airtight jar and grated when required.

Culinary use: Nutmeg is often included in rich food; eggnog is not complete without a sprinkling of nutmeg on the top. It is also used to flavour junkets, milk puddings, cakes, biscuits, breads, pumpkin pies etc. and nearly all beverages made with milk. It is excellent in cheese sauce and fillings for spinach and cheese dumplings and quiches. Nutmeg is also used to flavour oyster and fish dishes. Mulled wines are enhanced by the addition of a little

nutmeg together with cinnamon and clove

Mace is more widely used in savoury dishes and processed meats such as sausages. It is superb when added to potted shrimps or poached fish. Mace is often called for in pickles and chutney recipes. Grilled, buttered trout, lightly sprinkled with salt, freshly ground pepper and a dusting of mace tastes divine!

Medicinal and other uses: Nutmeg is narcotic. It is used by some fun-seekers for getting high and producing hallucinations and euphoria. Ingestion of large doses of nutmeg can be fatal. However nutmeg is not problematic when consumed in the quantities used in domestic recipes. Nutmeg is considered beneficial to the spleen, stomach and large intestines. Conditions for which it is most commonly used include vomiting, heartburn, abdominal distension, indigestion. It is said that grated nutmeg mixed with lard makes an excellent ointment for piles.

Nutmeg oil is used in cosmetics, perfumes, and soaps and in flavouring pharmaceuticals. Nutmeg on expression yields about 24 to 30 % fixed oil called nutmeg butter or oil of mace. An ointment of nutmeg butter has been used as an anti-irritant and in the treatment of rheumatism.