

HEAVEN ON EARTH

THERE ARE RASPBERRIES in heaven. In fact, up in heaven, raspberries are so plentiful and cheap that God and the angels take them for granted. After dinner the heavenly hosts say things like “Raspberries and cream for dessert?”

“No, thanks,” reply the cherubs. “We’ve been snacking on them all afternoon.”

Nutritionally, there may be a more perfect food, but in every other regard, nothing else comes close. I am speaking of red raspberries, of course, furry rubies, caviar of fruits. In the supermarket, they are packaged in puny, half-pint containers that can cost as much as a deli sandwich. In

the chill of the produce section, where the plastic wrap obscures their velvet and aroma, I can walk past them without turning a hair. But at the farmers' market, where they are heaped in warm, open pints, I am undone and there is no price I won't pay.

Tiny beaded lanterns, the color of a heart newly fallen in love—the architecture of the raspberry is precise and geometric, yet tender. There is even a specific, funny name for its succulent subdivisions: drupelets. A raspberry is a crust of drupelets clustered around an empty cup. The celestial harvest hangs on bushes called brambles, in honor of their defensive thorns.

There must have been raspberries in the Garden of Eden, which convinces me that Adam and Eve were, developmentally at least, nothing but babies. Because given the choice between an apple and an unlimited supply of raspberries, only a small child would go for the Red Delicious.

I know this for a fact because I once accompanied a class of three-year-olds to a pick-your-own farm where there were berries on the brambles and apples on the boughs. The children did not have any patience for the thimble-size berries, which, after an eternal minute's worth of picking, did not even cover the bottom of their paper boxes. The children much preferred the apples, fat prizes hung low enough to accommodate their modest reach. And they went absolutely nuts in the field of pumpkins, where they romped like a bunch of pixies in a Kodak commercial. Meanwhile, I munched happily on their forgotten raspberries.

PITCHING MY TENT

Berries, the whole lot of them, are exemplary things: concentrated pleasure, complete and cute. As with grapes, which are equally cunning but jollier in the way they explode between your teeth, the extreme edibility of berries—outside and in—invites you to make a direct line between hand and mouth.

So the idea of cooking raspberries seems almost criminal—although they are very fashionable swimming in sauces with game birds, or in puddles around chocolate cake. There are sound arguments to be made for raspberry jam, which has undeniably restorative powers on cold mornings when the memory of “pick your own” days can make you weep.

But the words “raw raspberries” back-to-back demonstrate how absurd it is to apply heat to something so eager to be eaten as is. Raspberries are the most fragile of foods. Even a thoughtless word can bruise them. Once ripe, they are in a rush to be consumed—but not too cold. Never, never right out of the refrigerator.

I once stood in the walk-in cooler of a restaurant when a local grower showed up with boxes of just-picked raspberries for that evening’s dessert. The man was not a farmer, it turned out, just a retired gentleman with a big old raspberry patch. I stared at the fellow with the amazing surfeit; more than enough to eat, more than enough to jelly—enough to sell the leftovers for cash.

It seemed like such fantastic wealth, such extravagant luxury. And, even though the darned things grow wild on nearly every continent, it has always seemed so. In the

presidential campaign of 1840, Martin Van Buren was viciously attacked for wallowing lasciviously in raspberries. What a delicious image.

What would it be like if we could all roll around in tubs of raspberries? What if those ruby velvet cuplets were as common on earth as they are in heaven—as ordinary as apples, and just as cheap? Would we chop them up thoughtlessly, mere filler for the fruit salad? Would September's summer days seem as wistful?

Despite their ephemerality and downy sensuality, however, I have never heard raspberries called an aphrodisiac. They do not make you want to do anything but eat more raspberries. Which makes them truly paradisiacal.

Raspberries remind you, without any recourse to reason, that paradise is visible, touchable, and tasteable. Paradise is present, provided that you don't just toss a handful into your mouth and gobble it down without feeling its almost imperceptible crush, without savoring the fragrance as the rosy juice dribbles sweetly by and by.