
HOSHIGAKI—THE ART OF DRYING WHOLE PERSIMMONS OR THE ZEN WORK OF AUTUMN

BY LARRY YEE

OK, you're busy baking your fifth loaf of persimmon bread and you've already shared batches of persimmon cookies with friends, family and office mates. And while these fall treats are simply the best, everyone is getting close to enough of a good thing.

So now, what do you do with the other 500 persimmons still hanging on your or the neighbor's tree?

You can do like most people and leave them hanging from their branches; when the leaves drop, you're left with one of nature's most beautifully decorated holiday trees (keeps the birds fat and happy). Like a priceless piece of Asian art in the landscape of the Western yard, the persimmon's bare, thin, angular branches are laden with large, acorn-shaped, pumpkin-colored fruit, tinged with yellow, the color of the setting autumn sun. (There's a haiku poem in there somewhere.) When the trees are loaded, it's amazing how much weight each limb can bear, so it's no surprise that the persimmon tree is in the same genus as ebony.

Or you can join a growing group of devotees who practice *hoshigaki*—the art (zen) of drying persimmons whole.

The Hachiya is the most common variety of persimmon and the acorn-shaped fruit has one of the highest pucker powers of any in the fruit kingdom—that is, if you try to eat it before its time. Like avocados, you pick them hard/firm and set them in a bowl to ripen. In a few days, when they're soft and somewhat mushy, the astringency has transformed into a rich, sweet flavor. Then they're ready to eat or be processed into baked delights. Simply cutting them open, scooping out the bright orange pulp and eating straight is delicious. Over vanilla ice cream isn't bad either.

Fuyu is the other common variety. It looks like a squat tomato and unlike the Hachiya, it can be eaten hard like an apple or soft like a ripe avocado. An awesome combination is peeled, sliced and drizzled with fresh-squeezed lime juice. Also, sliced in a salad of arugula with toasted pecans and crumbled Gorgonzola is fabulous. Fuyus, sliced thin, are excellent for drying in a dehydrator into persimmon chips, or you can dry them whole like the Hachiya in the method described below. When dried whole, they look like little red berets.

The first step in drying persimmons is, of course, the harvest. Be patient and leave them on the tree till they are fully orange, collecting as much sugar as they possibly can. With a little experience you'll know the right time. Perfect is right before they start to go soft. If they have started to soften, it's too late as they will be difficult to peel and have a tendency to ripen too fast.

Drying the whole Hachiya is a simultaneous ripening and drying process. As they ripen, they dry and the essence of the persimmon is preserved. This is a slow and patient process, but the rewards are ample.

Using a sharp pair of hand clippers, you can either cut the stem where it attaches to the twig or, if you're planning to hang dry, then cut the twig on both sides of where the stem attaches, leaving a ¼-inch piece of twig on each side. The result looks like a T, giving you something to tie the string onto. You can either tie two persimmons together with a 7- to 8-inch piece of string and loop the pair over a pole on a rack of some kind, or you can tie several together with each one dangling beneath another and hang the whole string under a protected place. To look at the stunning pictures of how they hang the fruit from the eaves of the houses in Japan and Korea, go to this website: www.obershawonline.com and do a search for "persimmons." Beats Christmas lights hands down!

The alternative to hang drying is the method that was taught to me by Young Cho, a Zen master of persimmon drying if ever there was one. Young and his wife, Autumn, retired and moved to Ojai in the late 1980s. Young's neighbor had a huge persimmon tree, which Young cared for in return for the fruit.

Each November his double-car garage would convert into a living room-sized food dehydrator. Young and Autumn



Photographs by Larry Yee

would laboriously process a thousand or more persimmons, carefully setting them on towel-covered tables and directly blowing air on them 24/7 for two to three weeks. Sometimes, if the weather got too cold, he would turn a small heater on to keep the temperature mildly warm. Since the garage door was fiberglass, light filtered through, creating a room bathed in orange as if you were on the inside a giant, translucent pumpkin.

Set in row after row, the drying Hachiyas stood at attention, propped up by their little kickstand of a stem. Once persimmons are peeled and set out to dry, they quickly develop a parchment-like skin. My father, who lived in China when he was a child, told me that during the fall the north wind blows cold and very dry. Anything that needed drying to be preserved would be placed outside in the sun and wind, letting nature take its course. The fans blowing air across the persimmons are Ojai's substitute for the north wind. The effect we're trying to create is something like a cool Santa Ana (without the fires).

Young passed away a few years ago. I miss his cheerful company as together we would peel, peel and peel some more. We'd also compare each other's finished product. While mine were quite good, his were perfect. It must have been the feng shui of his garage.

Peeling persimmons is where the zen practice comes in, especially if you do this solo. After the 20th or so persimmon you begin to enter into a trance-like state (boredom, if you will). I do 600–800 each year, so I could be in this state for a while (just ask my wife). But typically, I'll do 50–100 at a time every day for a week. A short cut is to make this a communal affair and invite your friends to a potluck dinner and tell them to bring their peelers. It works the first year. Or if you need to have a long conversation with your mate, then this can certainly provide you some quality time together.

Before you peel the persimmon, first take off the four-leaved calyx from around the stem. Once peeled, they're ready to be dried. I set them stem-side-down on stainless steel racks (the kind you see in small grocery stores; any of the home supply stores should carry them). Then turn your fan(s) on high, blowing air directly on the fruit, and settle in for a two- to three-week ritual. Each day, turn the persimmons to allow

another side to face the wind. Within two or three days, the parchment-like skin develops. By removing the outer impervious skin and letting a new permeable one develop, the moisture inside leaves slowly and the persimmons ripen and dry.

After four or five days, the persimmon will start to soften on the inside. This is when you revert to your newly discovered zen state and massage each one, gently breaking up the pulp inside and now laying them on their sides. This allows the persimmon to keep its heart-like shape. If you use the hanging method, the persimmon develops a more tubular, teardrop shape as gravity pulls the mushy pulp toward the bottom.

Everyday, massage and turn. When they start to get a bit leathery and feel like a soft, dried apricot, they're probably ready. Congratulations, you've arrived at persimmon nirvana!

I used to do this in my garage. Now I use a converted horse shed on the back of our property. Remember, this is a slow process, not to be rushed. One year, another persimmon devotee put his brood in too warm of a room and when he returned from a short trip, he found hundreds of mushy, moldy persimmons. Needless to say, he wasn't too zen-like, but after skipping a year, he's ready to try again.

Once they're dry, you can put them into plastic baggies and store them in your freezer. The sugar content is so high that you don't have to thaw before eating. Like one-a-day vitamins, I dig into the freezer each day and enjoy my labor of love throughout the year.

Attractively wrapped, they make wonderful holiday gifts.

Slow Food folks will be happy to know that this process is in the Slow Food Ark of Taste.

If hoshigaki catches on, we'll have to start an anonymous group for recovering persimmon peelers.

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