

The original homelands of the pistachio were Asia Minor (now Turkey), Iran, Syria, Lebanon and a bit north to the Caucasus in southern Russia and Afghanistan.

Documents and research have shown that the origin of pistachio trees lies in the North-east of Iran. For 5000 years people have been eating pistachios. Historic records claim that the queen of Sheba herself, demanded all of the Assyrian pistachios for her court.

Archeologists have found evidence in a dig site at Jerome, near northeastern Iraq, that pistachio nuts were a common food as early as 6750 BCE. Then, for unknown reasons, these nuts fell into obscurity until 2000 BCE when the Near East sprouted in population and less common foods such as pistachios were rediscovered and even cultivated. The hanging gardens of Babylon were said to have contained pistachio trees during the reign of King Merodach-baladan about 700 BCE.

Along with almonds, pistachios enjoy a rare mention in the Old Testament as the only two nuts found in the bible. "So their father, Jacob, finally said to them, 'If it must be, then do this: put some of the best products of the land in your bags and take them down to the man as gifts--a little balm, a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds. In the rocky hills of Palestine and Lebanon, pistachio trees grew wild, their treasured fruits picked and eaten raw or brought home and fried with salt and pepper. Not much went to waste in ancient times. Even the oil from the pistachio was pressed and used for cooking as well as for flavoring desserts.

The delightful green nutmeats had prominence in tasty, historical desserts such as Baklava, Nougat, and Turkish Delight where they served as a major ingredient. In biblical times chopped pistachios were added to fruit compotes, puddings, and stuffing's, while the nuts in their ground-up form added body and flavor too many savory sauces. Today, pistachios are a familiar American snack, while in Iranian cooking; the nuts are often added to rice dishes along with raisins or currants, herbs and saffron.

In the first century AD the pistachio made its debut in Rome via the Emperor Vally. Apices, Rome's Julia Child of the period, mentions pistachios in his classical cook book but deny us any of the recipes in which he includes them. The nuts traveled from Syria to Italy in the first century AD and spread throughout the Mediterranean from there.

The Persians used the pistachio abundantly, not only for desserts, but also in ground-up form to thicken and enhance sauces. The Arabs learned a few culinary secrets from the Persians and included pistachios in their dessert delicacies such as Baklava, a rich treat made from

buttered file dough alternately layered with nuts and bathed in sweet syrup after baking. Pistachios were willing travelers and held up well on distant journeys, trekking from Persia to China via the Silk Route.

When the Arabs settled in the southern part of Spain, known as Andalusia, and in Sicily during medieval times, they introduced many foods from their native lands. Because pistachios were one of the foods the Arabs longed for, they transported either seeds or pistachio trees to these regions.

The pistachios grown in Italy took on a very deep green color, were highly prized, and brought the best prices.

By the time pistachios were imported into Europe on a regular basis during the middle Ages, they were quite expensive and not everyone could afford them. However, in spite of their high cost, merchants of France had an ample supply for anyone willing to splurge on the green wonders. During the 16th century pistachios arrived in England where they were not a raging gastronomic success.

California encountered the pistachio in 1854 when Charles Mason, a seed distributor for experimental plantings, brought the pistachio to this country. Several years later, in 1875, a few small pistachio trees imported from France were planted in Sonoma, California. In the early 1900's Chico, California, became the home of the first experimental Plant Production Station. Funded by the USDA, this station brought in a variety of pistachio trees.

By the late 1970s the San Joaquin Valley in central California became a burgeoning area for the commercial production of pistachios.

Today, California produces about 80 million pounds of pistachios a year, a number that is expected to rise with their steadily growing popularity. Other large producers of pistachios today are Iran and Turkey. Syria, India, Greece, and Pakistan also grow pistachios but on a smaller scale.

The pistachio tree contributes more than its nuts to society. The tree oozes a resin, called terabit, which is collected and used in the making of turpentine.

Wood from the tree is an attractive, hard wood, dark red in color and valued in cabinet making.