

New grape varieties will tempt your sweet tooth

By Robert Rodriguez
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With September offering more grapes than any other time of the year, now may be a good time to venture beyond the Thompson seedless and the Red Flame.

Fans of super-sweet grapes will drool over the much-talked about Cotton Candy grape. The large green grape, grown by The Grapery in Delano, tastes like the spun sugar it's named after.

Also gaining an increasing amount of attention is the Thomcord – a cross between a Thompson seedless and Concord grape. The grape was developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's grape breeding program and has a fresh, crisp taste similar to grape juice.

Among the growers of the Thomcord is Brandt Farms in Reedley, which is selling the grape under the Grape Jammers brand. The dark blue grape got a positive reaction from buyers and consumers at the recent Fresno Food Expo.

Locally, you can find the Cotton Candy grape at Sprouts Farmers Market at 7477 N. Blackstone Ave. in Fresno and the Thomcord at Whole Foods Market, Save Mart supermarkets and Walmart.

Kathleen Nave, president of the Fresno-based California Table Grape Commission, says growers are always interested in new varieties of grapes, especially those that are large, sweet and more economical to grow. The challenge for farmers is that breeding programs take a long time.

"It is an ongoing process of development and investment in new varieties and getting into the marketplace," Nave says.

Two grapes that made the cut and have become dominant are the Scarlet Royal and Autumn King.

"These are two varieties that we looked at in the '90s," she says.

In all, San Joaquin Valley growers produce about 80 varieties of grapes from May through December, with a bulk of the grapes being picked in the fall.

"In some ways our season is just getting started," says Nave.

And what a season it's been already. Despite the drought, fruit quality and size have been excellent. Consumers like Stephanie Nunnally of Fresno say this is one of the best-tasting seasons ever.

She is a regular at Kaiser Permanente Fresno's farmers market at North Fresno Street and East Alluvial Avenue. Every Wednesday morning she checks what grapes are available.

"I haven't even tried cooking with them," she says. "I just wash them, put them in a bowl and feast on them all summer. My heart hurts when they are gone for the season."

Among the grapes that are the most popular with consumers are Scarlet Royal, Flame Seedless, Autumn King, Crimson Seedless, Red Globe, Sugarone, Autumn Royal, Princess and Thompson seedless, Nave says.

And still in demand are older varieties of seeded grapes, including Niabell, a dark purple grape with the flavor of grape juice, and Calmeria, a long, thick-skinned green grape with a sweet and slightly tangy taste. The muscat of

Alexandria is an ancient grape with a distinct sweet and earthy flavor.

Jim Simonian, of Simonian Farms at South Clovis and East Jensen avenues, says consumers can expect to see newer varieties that are focused on sweeter flavor and longer shelf life. He says grapes like the Autumn King, a big, juicy green grape, may soon replace the Thompson seedless.

“It’s a grape with lower acid, so it can taste sweeter,” he says. “And it gets really big.”

Farmer Karl Warkentin of Dinuba grows Autumn Kings, and they sell very well at Kaiser’s farmers market. He nearly sells out.

“They taste really good chilled in the refrigerator, and the kids love to freeze them,” Warkentin says. “They are so big, it’s almost like eating a Popsicle.”

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California grape and avocado salad

Recipe by Heather K. Jones, R.D., for the California Table Grape Commission.

For dressing:

1 1/2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 1/2 tablespoons fresh lime juice

2 teaspoons honey

1 teaspoon sea salt

For salad:

3 cups red seedless California grapes, halved

2 tablespoons snipped fresh cilantro

1 tablespoon minced jalapeño pepper

2 green onions, sliced

1 ripe avocado, cubed

1/4 cup roasted, salted pumpkin seeds

1/4 cup crumbled Cotija cheese (optional)

To prepare the dressing: Whisk together the oil, lime juice, honey and salt in a large bowl.

To prepare the salad: Stir the grapes, cilantro, jalapeño and green onions into the dressing. Add the avocado and stir again lightly. Sprinkle the top with the pumpkin seeds and cheese, if desired.

California grape pizza

Recipe from the California Table Grape Commission.

1 pound prepared pizza dough

3/4 cup prepared pizza sauce

1 1/2 cups halved California seedless grapes

1 cup diced lean ham

1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese

Preheat oven to 450 degrees.

Divide dough into 8 equal portions. Spread into pizza rounds on baking sheets.

Spread with pizza sauce, sprinkle with grapes, ham and cheese. Bake until dough is lightly browned and cheese melted, about 12 to 14 minutes.

Yield: 8 mini pizzas

Breakfast-to-go grape smoothie

Recipe from the California Table Grape Commission.

1 1/2 cups frozen California grapes

1 banana, sliced

1/2 cup vanilla or honey low-fat Greek yogurt

1/2 cup grape juice

1/4 cup wheat flake cereal

Combine all the ingredients in a blender and blend for 1 minute. Serve immediately. Makes 2 1/3 cups of smoothie.