

ROTTEN POMEGRANATES

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Have you ever eaten a pomegranate tipping toward decay? They're my favorite fruit and, living as I do in the north, the ones I find in grocery stores are almost always some degree of overripe. You get used to the rhythm of separating good seeds from bad ones. Over the years I've learned some lessons about the process of picking sweetness out of rot.

1. It starts near the edges and works its way in.

You'll always notice the first mushy brown arils at the very perimeter of the pomegranate. Don't be discouraged by this. Deep inside, at the heart of the fruit, there may be some red goodness left.

2. You will have to inspect each individual corpuscle.

There's no way around it. Thoroughness is the only way to achieve perfection. If you yank out handfuls of seeds, you'll let some bad ones in with the good, and conversely some good ones in with the bad.

3. Go by touch, not by sight.

It seems counterintuitive, since the most obvious sign of spoilage is beige discoloration, deep red gone pale and then sickly brown. But you'll get better results if you feel it out. Run your fingers over the surface of the aril, feeling for soft spots, for interruptions in the skin, a malformation of the ideal jewellike shape. Once you get the hang of it, the work will move fast.

4. If the sarcotesta is stained red and soft beneath your fingers and the fruits are dark as plum juice, don't be discouraged.

They have a strange flavor; but they're not bad! Try one, find that it tastes like purple wine and old cellars.

5. Keep the bad seeds aside and check them once you're done.

You'll make some mistakes along the way — I know you will. We're all fallible. Give the discarded seeds a once-over before you move on to the next step and see if you threw away any good ones by mistake. You'll want to save

each drop of goodness; your overall yield will already be less than a normal pomegranate.

6. When you're done dissecting and checking, get your bowl of water. The first wash is to separate the fleshy coat from the arils and rinse away the taste of decay. Then, pour off the water (carefully, don't lose a single seed!) and fill up the bowl again.

7. The second time, look for silver. Under water, patches of mushy brown flash iridescent like strange fish. Find them, pick them out, swirl the bowl, and try again. You'll be surprised at how much rot slipped under your guard. Pick and pick until you're satisfied that this is what you want to eat.

8. Wash one last time with cold water. The chill plumps the seeds up, and the water rinses away the last aftertaste of blight.

9. When you're done, don't delay. Time stops for no one. They're already rotting and it was such an effort to liberate them. Shovel them into your mouth by the dozen and feel no shame. How sweet a minute of satisfaction tastes when it took an hour to get there.

It's nonfiction about fruit, I really can't say much more. I'm simply devoted to bringing hard-hitting produce journalism to the people.