

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ATW-5

When It's Mango Time Down South

Panamá City, Panamá

April 9, 1972

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017
U.S.A.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Arriving in San José, the capital of Costa Rica, I found mangoes on sale on every downtown streetcorner. Big mangoes. Ripe mangoes. Wonderful mangoes.

I don't know whether I can convey to you the joy of this discovery. I have a passion for mangoes, and although I have traveled in the tropics before, I have never managed to be in a mango-growing region when the fruit was in season. In India I was too early; in South America, seven years ago, too late; in Mexico, two years ago, too early again. But this time I was not to be cheated. In southern Mexico in February I saw the first green mangoes on the streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas. Unripe, the size of eggs, and as hard as potatoes, they are sliced and eaten as a snack with salt and chili. The taste is sour, bracingly sour, yet with a decided hint of the distinctive flavor that is so overwhelmingly delicious in the ripe fruit. In Guatemala in early March I came across the first ripe ones. Small, blotched, of uneven quality, they hardly deserved to be called mangoes. But they were an unmistakable sign that I was on the trail and getting warm.

And then San José! When I say every downtown streetcorner, I mean every downtown streetcorner. And not just one kind: I was able to buy at least four varieties of mango in Costa Rica, each better

than the last. One was long, oval, yellow, and drippingly juicy. Another was large, round, orange-red, with flesh the consistency of ice cream. The flavor of each kind was distinctive. And, probably, that was just the beginning. There are hundreds of varieties of mango, and these were just the earliest.

My mango cravings go back to early childhood in Philadelphia when a fruitarian aunt let me taste one that had been sent to her from Florida. In those days mangoes hardly ever made it north. Now, they are shipped up quite regularly so that even the rural farm market near my home in northern Virginia had them in June last year. But of the mangoes that one can buy in the north, only a tiny percentage are worth eating. Picked long before they are ripe, removed from the intense sun that they depend on, their maturation is aborted and they rarely ripen in the way nature intended. And a mango that is not perfectly ripe is far from wonderful, for it contains a powerful concentration of acid and an oil that tastes like turpentine.⁺ Persons who think they do not like mangoes may never have tasted one in the right stage for eating. To do that, one must really go to the tropics. For the mango is a tree of the torrid zone, and even in southern Florida it is not quite as happy as it should be.

The Asian tropics are the native home of the mango, and in Asia no country is more closely associated with the fruit than India, where the mango tree is regarded as sacred. The best mangoes in the world are said to come from Bombay. I was in Bombay once, but unluckily it was January, several months too early. An Indian I met there told me that at the height of the season, people lie on the sidewalks with glazed looks of ecstasy as they let ripe mangoes drip into their mouths. In his Autobiography of a Yogi the late Paramahansa Yogananda wrote that it is impossible for a Hindu to conceive of a heaven without mangoes.

This reverence for mangoes is visible wherever they are grown.

⁺The mango is a member of the cashew family, the Anacardiaceae, a plant group rich in toxins and irritant oils. Poison ivy belongs to this family, and the skin of the mango contains an oil that produces in some people a contact dermatitis like that of poison ivy. Allergic individuals can still enjoy the fruit if they handle it with gloves and peel it carefully before eating.

One day in San José I bought a bag of them and went back to my hotel to eat them. The elevator boy asked me what I had bought. "Mangoes," I said. "Oh," he said, and we looked at each other and grinned. He knew. Mango-venders grin at you the same way. They know. They all know the capacity of this fruit to give pleasure, extraordinary pleasure. A tugboat captain with whom I once shared some mangoes in Miami at the tail-end of the season said as he slurped a juicy slice, "Next best thing to sex." (He used a more vivid word.)

The flavor of the mango is neither subtle nor simple. It is complex and rich the way Indian music is complex. And it is so luscious that it commands one's whole attention. I have seen people eat ordinary fruit -- apples, oranges, bananas -- casually, nibbling at them while reading, writing, carrying on conversations. I have never seen anyone eat a perfect mango and be able to do anything but concentrate on the pure pleasure of the experience. I indulged in that experience quite frequently during the week I spent in San José.

Now, although I could not do anything while I was actually experiencing these mango highs, I could not help thinking afterward how analogous they are to other sorts of highs. In fact, the image of Indians in Bombay stretched out with glazed expressions dripping mangoes into their mouths (something I have never seen, mind you, only heard about) has always stuck with me because it sounds so much like an altered state of consciousness. The knowing grins of mango devotees, the comparison of the pleasure of eating the fruit to sexual pleasure, the sacred status of the tree in India, all point to an ability to transport people to a realm of experience out of the ordinary. And the essence of that experience is concentration, in this case on an intensely pleasurable sensation in the mouth. When I indulge in serious mango-eating, I become oblivious to things around me, even to things inside me, such as my thoughts. For a brief time there is nothing but the pleasure, and the pleasure is a high.

Or, perhaps it would be better to say that the pleasure triggers a high, because it seems to me that it is the concentration that is the high, the pleasure being merely the stimulus for concentration.

Anything that can bring about this focusing of attention can get us high, even if it is something normally perceived as painful. In fact, pain, itself, if a person is set to perceive it differently (that is, to accept it, not to resist it), can bring about a state of intense concentration and a resultant high. The highs of altered states of consciousness such as those of trance and meditation are similarly related to focusing of awareness. When we learn to bring about this kind of concentration at will, we can be independent of external triggers for highs, whether drugs, sex, or mangoes.

Yoga philosophy says that one step in this process is constant self-reminding that the high comes from within, not from without -- from the nervous system, not from the mango. Being at an early stage of this practice, I am furious to be in Panamá and find only a few scrawny mangoes for sale. "It's too early," people tell me, not at all impressed when I wave my arms and shout that it was not too early in Costa Rica. If I arrive in Colombia and am told it's too late there will be trouble. I have no intention of breaking the mango habit by going cold turkey.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Andrew T. Weil

Received in New York on April 12, 1972.