

Sugar Plums

Portuguese Natives

by Brett Gold



*“The children were nestled all snug
in their beds.*

*While visions of sugar-plums danced
in their heads.”*

These words from Clement C. Moore’s, ‘The Night Before Christmas’ are familiar to most Americans and Brits. Yet how many of us have ever tasted or even know what a sugar plum is? Curiosity got the best of me after seeing some for sale in the Williams Sonoma Holiday catalog this season, where the description and accompanying picture make it clear that the ‘ameixa doce’ are grown and cooked in Elvas, Portugal as they have been since the days of Henry the Navigator. And here we are in Portugal! I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to track down this elusive fruit - especially since a half-pound box via this gourmet retailer costs \$26.

Just when and where sugar plums were confectioned for the first time is not certain. But the idea of such a fanciful treat has often delighted poets and musicians. Throughout the 1800s the Sugar Plum gained in reputation. Along with *The Night Before Christmas* (1822), the German tale *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* told of a fairyland with marvelous sweets. The French version *Histoire d’un Casse-Noisett* inspired the music of Tchaikovsky. Like magic, the Sugar Plum Fairy came into being, dancing in the *Nutcracker* ballet, an American favorite at Christmas time. America first tasted Portugal’s sugar plums in 1875 when they arrived on one of the last Clipper ships.

Portugal, known for its national sweet tooth, has long created a wide variety of sweets and confections, including candied sugar plums since the 1400s. Only Queen Cláudia, jade-green plums from Elvas are used in the creation of these special holiday treats, and supply is tight.

With the help of Fatima Airey in Protocol, a visit was arranged to one of three sugar plum plants in the Elvas - Estremoz area. The direct drive to Elvas took about two and a half hours, followed by a bit of slow going as we twisted and climbed through some very narrow and winding streets within the walls of the old city. Upon arrival at the Mário Conceição factory atop Elvas, we were warmly welcomed into the rustic workplace by Senhor Conceição and his wife. Then it was on to a guided tour of this age-old process which their family has been involved in for two generations, since 1919.

Conversation was strictly in Portuguese so liberally translated, the evolution of a sugar plum is as follows... The special green plums are harvested in June and August. They are boiled in small batches, first in plain water, then in sugar water, and finally left to soak in a sugar syrup for 200 days. Lastly, the sweetened fruit is set out to dry, shriveling in the process, before being packaged for sale.

The Mário Conceição factory is a low-tech operation where the means of converting a green plum into one of fantasy unfolds the way it has been done for hundreds of years. The plums soak in countless ceramic pots and are dried outdoors (weather permitting!) on handmade screen trays where they enjoy a marvelous view of the Alentejo countryside below. The 25 tons of plums the factory was able to purchase this past season are turned into sugar plums by just 15 workers over a two month period. All are sold within Portugal as Mário Conceição stopped exporting to Great Britain and New York after 1974.

So how do they taste? Sweet! One or two after a meal or as a snack most definitely satisfies a sugar urge. They're like fruitcake - the idea and image of these holiday delicacies is more fantastic than the reality. But at least now I've tasted one and know whence they come. The retail cost of a half kilo box of Mário Conceição's sugar plums is 2500\$, about half the price for twice the amount of Williams Sonoma's half-pound, \$26 package. And there's no shipping charge!



Mário Conceição and his wife in front of drying sugar plums.



The editor's kids posing before the al fresco plums resting on handmade screen trays.

*Where you can buy Mário Conceição sugar plums
in the Lisbon area:*

Lisbon

Mercearia Manuel
TavaresRua Betesge, 1-A/B
342-42-09

Parede

Pastelaria Ribeiro
Avenida de República, 1317-D
457-11-00