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Jillian Ciaccia

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MANUFACTURE OF NON-BLEEDING MARASCHINO CHERRIES

JILLIAN CIACCIA

Silent and spotted, a cherry tree blossomed. Its several thousand leaves, green and bowed, formed several thousand individual shadows, black and long, tickling a nutritious earth and providing shade to plump fruit, attached to a branch, at a single point, hanged by its signature stem. The weather, chrome yellow and pleasant, maintained such a disposition over the past several months, forming a passive, stable environment where premature fruit safely developed sugars and a bulbous shape, wrapped in a thin skin bearing striking resemblance to its paternal surroundings, a fresh, pale hue of yellow signifying an absorption of light that had saturated air molecules, trickled across the palm of a leaf in excess, and dove, falling, through pores of the fruit; the trail left in its wake, a flush bright hue at rounded corners. Just below the skin, billions of entwining fibers sewed the fruits' meat, white and soiled by an abundance of sucrose, which, continually warmed by the numerous degrees in Fahrenheit, remained liquid. These minor flows and roaming lakes orbited a cherry's body, were periodically soaked and expelled, soaked and expelled, within and without the porous innards, preventing dehydration, leaving the fruit's personality and curves buoyant and receptive to one's examining pinch, a gentle, quick squeeze between an index and flat thumb.

The fruit, mostly neutral in color, plump and limbless, is easily harvested with an extended reach. A metal ladder with thirteen flat, metal steps is untangled, its four long limbs dug securely into the loose, shaded soil with several twisting shifts driven by tanned hands attached at a single point to tanned forearms, hands grasping two legs of the ladder, and repeating a motion swaying left, right, and down, into the earth, to stabilize the weight of an employee centralized upon a single point, stepping left, right, and up, stair after stair. The ladder responds with an aching creak as one foot, then the other, makes contact and climbs, carrying a body to the thirteenth step. There, at the highest point, one is enveloped by a canopy of leaves extending throughout a field of vision, and exposed to a dozen degrees fewer in

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Fahrenheit than when planting the ladder, a sensation felt along the outermost layer of skin, and especially about the eyes, where tears and moisture experience a dry chill, evoking a defensive blink to rehydrate the bulbous shapes hidden snugly in sockets.

The cherries are separated from a tree limb one by one, dislocated at the brown knuckle where a cherry's stem grew from a secure branch. This requires a pinch, a tight squeeze of remarkable strength produced by a pair of fingertips. Directed by a hand, they position below the targeted fruit, yellow and unaware. Using the final step of the ladder as leverage, a pair of feet curl upon toes, providing half a dozen or so additional inches, up, following the thin curvature of the stem to its hanging place. The reach brushes into leaves, shifting and animating the long black shades far below, producing a friction in the sound of muted rustling, until an arm has strained forward just enough to land the fingertips upon the bark, with a thumb dug into a tree branch, for leverage, and an index tapping a cherry's stem. With an inhale, muscles wrapping bone in the hand fill with blood and tighten, bearing added weight upon the skeleton, buckling the knuckle where index, thumb, greets a hand. The kinetic energy travels from the joint across the length of the fingers, accumulating at the cul-de-sac beneath a swirling pattern of two individual fingerprints, which respond identically to this flood, compressing, fainting, smearing against the bark, producing a pinch, that with an exhale, soft flesh accepts minor brown splinters, and a branch accepts loss of fruit.

Though detached from its source, the stem is retained, one end locked between the cherry's pair of rounded bulbs, and the other, flailing, independent and outstretched as the fruit is dropped, released from fingers, tugged now by gravity into a brown cloth sack hitched at the employee's hips. Here, thousands of cherries and thousands of their stems intertwine, forming clusters of hairy, earthy knots around bodies, through, around, and over, looping flexible stems into calligraphic shapes. High above, lost in the chill cover of foliage, eardrums absorb the rhythmic impact of tumbling cherries, dull thuds indicating the brief yet violent collision of two dense meaty bodies. The pinch and process continues for an immeasurable amount of time as any indicator, say, the sun's angle in a harvest sky or even the convenience of a simple wristwatch is usurped by the cover of cherries or the need to pluck, as hands and the wrists to which they are attached are outstretched and functioning. There is no time, only the end of an obsessive, repetitive, manual task, to gather, until there is no more to gather, when the thudding ends, and the only sound is muted rustling of wind toying with dry leaves.

It is time to descend the ladder with extreme caution to balance, one's safety, and, more important, the safety of the cherries, as the threat of little bodies spilling over the lip of the sack is great. The retreat is backward and disorienting, relying solely on muscle memory and a misty recollection of the general distance between each ladder's step, a recording that took place during the ascent, muffled and nearly lost underneath the blaring task of picking a cherry tree dry. Once again, the entire length of the left arm is summoned. From shoulder, to pointy elbow, to the longest tip of the hand, the full limb aligns to form a comforting arc tracing the obese frame of the glutted sac. Muscles surrounding the spine and back tighten, pulling the shoulder and its permanent appendage closer to the body, squeezing into over stretched stomach muscles the large sac of cherries, now secure from spillage and triggering the motion of descent, a left foot blindly setting upon a metal step below, gaining stiff confidence in the ankle as the ladder exhales the familiar laborious sigh of bearing weight, yes, this is where you must land.

Within a warehouse, composed of high ceilings and general sterility, hands are clasped in prayer position. Slowly flowering, the gap between the left and right hand grows, revealing the stem of eight fingers, fatigued and tanned from plucking, yet prepared for the task ahead. Wrists slightly nicked from accidental contact with bark flatten in relief, and palms are exposed, turning upwards, making visible curious forked lines and curious thoughts as to their end; with thumbs lying limp, each forming an awkward horizontal stab into the air, the hands are now soft cupping tools designed to transport disoriented cherries from their overpopulated sac into a brine bath. With a heave, the tips of eight fingers dig into the yellow, young pile, separating a small number from the rest, lifting with exceptional ease thirty or so cherries, whose long, thin stems reluctantly release a knotted grip of identical fruit that were, by chance, outside the range of the natural cupping tool. They fall a short, dense distance into the sac, producing, once again, those familiar thuds, rolling to a stop upon another cherry, and watch, as hands filled, walk over to a mountainous volume of organized jars.

The brine is composed mostly of water, clear and adequately meeting the standards of clean tap. Above the open mouth of the jar, hands separate from their cupping position, creating a divide that no longer supports limbless fruit. With palms and their untold fortune breaking away, cherries trickle and splosh into the brine. As the divide grows vast, a steady, maddening rush plummets into the jar, breaking surface tension with round bodies.

Held within the jar, their forms are silent, suspended, displayed behind a glass partition whose cylindrical frame bloats each little cherry into a round, pale creature. Under observation for five weeks, their absolution of color and taste is noted, a slow steady bleeding of natural sugars and youth into the surrounding placenta, composed of a burning amount of sodium and sulfates. A simultaneous preservation and aging process, the salt tempts water from a cherry's thin layer of skin drop by drop, forming over the hours and days, minor folds and wrinkles, signs of excess flesh as the body within has begun to shrink, lacking the elements that cause decay. The sulfur stops the cherry's heart, pausing its life at this very stage of wrinkly youth, inducing a permanent sleep. Tumbling into a wonderful nothingness, carelessness, the sinuous innards of the meat relieve themselves of functional duties that keep the fruit alive and well; this role, administrative and controlled, has been passed on to the brine's measured amount of synthetic calcium, who with spectacles upon the bridge of a stout nose, reorganizes the skin's texture, making certain a cherry remains crisp, so when an assortment of teeth bite down into this treat, it will seem, *seem*, this fruit had never been touched. It will respond, under this pressure, with an exhaling snap and a minor leak of citric acid, posing as a sweet, natural characteristic that is actually injected by the brine.

On the thirty-fifth day, the cherries are completely bald, lacking hues of any color, lacking a significant amount of taste, simply white, balls, silent, suspended. They will feel nothing, as the machine used to de-pit each cherry one by one feels nothing. To prepare, jars are unscrewed, turned by a hand, warm and jointed, clockwise. Tipped horizontally above a simple metal sink, the brine filters through the pile of dead young fruit, draining to a cascade and flushing their originality through rusting pipes of an unseen sewer system. With the last of the liquid gone, the jar is then tipped to a disorienting angle, upside down, with its bottom facing the world and its mouth open, vomiting up each innard into an aluminum holding tank. Out the cherries tumble, each limp little body falling, knocking hard against the flaccid paneling, which, upon each impact, pulsed with palpations. Empty and cold, the jar is discarded, sent to an isolated room where feet are to be wrapped in latex prior to entry; to be sanitized under violent levels of heat, the jar's mouth will first be rinsed out with oxides and industrial cleaners of biological proportions. Twice. These cellular killers, however, are safe enough, are easily washed away with a quick run under an average faucet. As such, the jar is wiped dry, its mouth open, belly empty and hungry, waiting patiently,

silently for the next harvest. For now, *this* machine has the cherries in its cavernous, toothless face, funneling to a stout, single pipe. Here one cherry is held at a time and de-pitted in exceptional speed, tenths of a second, by a thin metal needle of exceptional strength. Ejected and retracted by hydraulics and electricity, the needle spears its five-pointed tip into the lifeless, thin flesh, past the pseudo-sweet meat and into the hard shell of a useless seed.

Anchored, the needle retreats, carrying in its claws the remains, who, obtuse and unaware, punches an exit hole through the cherry's bottom. Soulless, the cherry is discharged from the pipe; its seed is released and discarded. It is now ready to be re-sweetened.

Spit into a large processing tank, the pile of empty cherries is hosed with cold tap water, spouting from the tube of a rubber nozzle. There is to be no remaining taste of salt, sulfur, evidence of artificiality, or natural yellow hues for that matter. There is to be nothing of substance, no suggestion of a past, as the cherry is now a simple vessel, to carry within its dry veins a queer concoction of coloring, a red, a lively red, a lovely red, flush and plump as a pair of young lips. It is to be the color of blood, flowing blood, alive and thick with nutrients, oxygen, and lust. It is, in fact, extracted from life, drop by drop, a deep crimson, edible, carminic pus produced naturally, and harvested, from the crushed innards of an insect, a female insect.

They feel nothing. Soft bodied, with a jovial round abdomen, the shock of boiling water is horrifically monumental to such a tiny, simple nervous system. As the hundreds of degrees in Fahrenheit roll onto a wingless body all but two-tenths of an inch in length, there is hardly any struggle. The insect is consumed by an overrun sensory experience, from limb to eye, and back again, the message of pain is received and sent, from limb to eye and back again, through the little body, sent and received so swiftly there is no pain felt, perhaps, only a numbing in the chest, and palpitations from the heart, a heart so frantic and exhausted it bursts, as the liver bursts, the kidneys, bowels, small intestine, and large intestine bursts, organs that had inflated with boiling water and stretched beyond the capacity a little body all but two-tenths of an inch in length can withstand.

The skin remains in tact. The inside, however, is liquid, a red hysterical mess of cells and digested food. This is hidden, behind the wet, green skin. It must come out.

The dead female insects are dried in the sun, for five days. Water is slowly extracted, teased away from the skin by a charming, warm sun, in a very blue sky; the weather had maintained such a disposition over the past

several months, aiding in the production of thousands and thousands of dead female insects. This particular crop is composed of one hundred and fifty-five thousand dried ladies, their withered scales fold and ripple, reducing an already petite frame further still, down to more than a quarter of two-tenths of an inch. Small yet necessary.

On the fifth day, a net will fish their bodies out from a burnt, weathered rubber tub, flicking each into a mulling stone. There, the insides will come out, with an exhaled pop, through the skin. Void of moisture, the collection of innards are paste, an unidentifiable semi-puddle as to what is kidney and what is liver. Nonetheless, the paste is red, a lively red, the color of innards, shocked.

It will join with corn syrup in a ceremony that rehydrates the paste. This forms a solution the emptied cherries are to bathe in, for their skins to absorb and their sinuous fibers to swallow, to become sweet once again, to be filled with life once again, to dazzle a drink or delight a child as a Maraschino cherry is placed upon a mound of vanilla ice cream in a Sundae.

For a biography of Jillian Ciaccia, please see page 255.