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The Spaghetti Tree

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THE SPAGHETTI TREE

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We have become accustomed to eating artificial spaghetti that we purchase at the market, unaware that the natural, organic version actually grows on plants. *Pastadendron italica*, the spaghetti tree, is native to the hilly regions of the Mediterranean. It is a member of the family Malvaceae, which also contains cotton, okra, and the ornamental hibiscus. The edible portion is a stringy outgrowth attached to one end of the seeds. In the early summer, the tree's woody pods split open to reveal numerous seeds, each with a string of carbohydrate-rich tissue about 30 cm long. It is a curious sight to see hundreds of these trees with their strands of spaghetti dangling gracefully in the wind. Processing is simple, but laborious. Workers, usually of the peasant class, move through the spaghetti tree plantations and harvest the material manually. Attempts to mechanize the process have not been successful. As with cotton, it is necessary to separate the seed, which will be discarded, from the desired portion. This is done by hand, one seed at a time. The tissue is then washed and placed in the sun to dry by carefully arranging the spaghetti on a network of strings or wire drying racks. Almost all of the work is done by women. A few years ago, the BBC produced an award-winning documentary on the harvesting and processing of spaghetti. A particularly touching part of the film showed women singing various harvesting songs, handed down from mother to daughter, as they plucked the spaghetti from the trees.

Historically, the very best spaghetti came from trees grown around Tuscany. Unfortunately, almost all of them were destroyed during the intensive bombing raids of World War II. This prompted the research to produce artificial spaghetti, as did a dramatic increase in the popularity of Mediterranean foods. Attempts to improve spaghetti's nutritional quality and the length of the strands through hybridization with other species of *Pastadendron* have not been successful. The Italian government has funded a spaghetti tree germplasm center ("seed bank") in Rome, in an attempt to preserve the genetic heritage of the species. To date, five genomes have been identified.

Real spaghetti is once again available in our local markets, but it is quite a bit more expensive. It is sold under the label "Spaghetti Antigua" or "Spaghetti a la Tuscany." It must be kept refrigerated. Once you have eaten the real thing, you will never go back to the insipid, artificial version.

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