

Context and Culture

Melons: Afghan riches at the surface level

Fabrizio Foschini

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Winter chills are slowly creeping into our sunny Kabul existences. There are few comforts for this, and one is certainly fruit. In this season, oranges, guavas and, above all, pomegranates do a lot to assuage our troubles. AAN's Fabrizio Foschini and Gran Hewad have also been finding solace in the memory of the bountiful melon market of Kabul, to which they were keen visitors and customers through the long days of summer.

It is of the colour of topaz, of musky odour, and in taste of the taste of honey; it has the hue of brocade, and it has fragrance as that of fresh aloe. When you cut it into slices, every one of them presents the appearance of the crescent: and if you do not cut it, in its entirety it is like the full moon. (poet at the court of Mahmud of Ghazni)

The subject of the poetry above and of the following blog is the Afghan melon. Actually, it would be more appropriate to speak of 'Afghan melons', as the country displays a wider diversity of melons than of tribes. In the past, melons were not only food for the poet's soul, but an economic heavyweight for Afghanistan. Together with grapes, they constituted the most prized export commodity among fresh fruit, and also accounted for a portion of the dried exports. While we are waiting for the hidden mineral wealth of Afghanistan to solve all the budgetary problems of the country – just few days ago a tender for auriferous deposits was announced by the Ministry of Mines (read [here](#)) – there are other golden treasures that could be profitably exported, as they were in the not so distant past. We believe that, while it is certainly worth exploring new ways of guaranteeing the country's economic sustainability, there is nothing wrong in looking back at the old ones.

Between the years 1966-69, for example, fresh fruit constituted one of the foremost items among Afghan exports, well above other prominent products as carpets and rugs, wool or raw cotton, and second only to dried fruit and nuts, and Karakul skins. The latter however, were mainly directed for auction sale in Europe, while half of the dried fruit and practically all of the fresh fruit exports headed for Pakistan and India, constituting almost the totality of the Afghan exports to its neighbouring countries.*

In fact, Afghan melons have a long history of regional mobility, and one of the most famous examples of it is given by the efforts made by the Mughals to preserve this favourite part of their diets after having shifted their capital from Kabul to Agra/Delhi. Thus, for example, expressed himself Babur, the founder of the dynasty, during his decisive campaign in northern India:

*They very recently brought me a single musk-melon; while cutting it up, I felt myself affected with a strong feeling of loneliness, and a sense of my exile from my native country, and I could not help shedding tears while I was eating it. ***

If Babur's native country was the Ferghana Valley, and early sections of his Baburnamah really sound like a consumer guide to the fruit markets of Central Asia, when craving for his favourite fruit in the melon-less Gangetic plains, it was fruit from the Kabul area or Balkh in northern Afghanistan that he had in mind. After his early eviction from Central Asia, these were in fact the regions where he started a new life, extending his sway and enjoying his melons. With the somewhat snobbish attitude of the connoisseur, Babur considered the melons of Kabul 'tolerable', and those of Ghazni 'abundant'. He however extolled with less reserve those of Balkh and brought both seeds and an expert agronomist from there to India, where the latter was able



to produce some 'very excellent' melons in the royal gardens. It was these places, together with Kandahar and Herat, from where Babur's successors on the Mughal throne, now more solidly implanted in India, would have their favourite melons sent from.

Less than a century after Babur's joy at the arrival of a lone melon in India, his grand-nephew, Jahangir, was literally tailed by massive fruity caravans, proceeding from Afghanistan, wherever he roamed in his military campaigns or on administrative trips across the Subcontinent. Here is what he received in 1616 in the middle of Malwa (present day Madhya Pradesh):

At the same stage, they brought many melons grown in Kārīz near Herat... On one tray, they brought many kinds of fruit — Kārīz melons, melons from Badakhshan and Kabul, grapes from Samarkand and Badakhshan, apples from Samarkand, Kashmir, Kabul, and from Jalalabad, which is a dependency of Kabul... The sweet pomegranates of Yazd, and the subacid ones of Farah. In what language can one give thanks for such favours? My revered father had a great liking for fruit, especially for melons, pomegranates, and grapes. During his time the Kārīz melons, which are the finest kind, and pomegranates from Yazd, which are celebrated throughout the world, and Samarkand grapes had not been brought to Hindustan. Whenever I see these fruits they cause me great regret. Would that such fruit had come in those days, so that he might have enjoyed them!

Jahangir is also clear about the grandiosity and efficiency of such a transportation effort, when he writes (a couple of years later, while touring through Gujarat):

At this place some melons came from Kārīz, which is a town dependent on Herat, and it is certain that in Khurasan there are no melons better than those of Kārīz. Although this is at a distance of 1,400 kos, and kafilahs [caravans] take five months to come, they arrived very ripe and fresh. They brought so many that they sufficed for all the servants. ... My tongue fails me in giving thanks to Allah for this. "Thankfulness for Thy favours is one of Thy favours."

As for the quantities, we are informed that the melons, although definitely a luxury item, were not exported in trifling numbers:

On this day there arrived 1,500 melons from Kārīz. The Khān Ālam had sent them as a present. I gave a thousand of them to the servants in attendance, and five hundred to the women of the harem. ... Some of the melons were given to the Shaikhs of Ahmadabad, and they were astonished to see how inferior were the Gujarat melons. They marvelled at the goodness of the Deity.

Not much seems to be left of the former glory of the Herati melons, which without praise or blame, nowadays mainly satisfy the local market. Kandahar has been and still is another hot spot for melons in Afghanistan. Indeed, due to its position in the *garmsir* (hot climate) regions, it can provide a two-crop farming year. Still, its fruit does not lose in quality for the sake of sheer quantity, and if the city is famous mainly for its grapes and pomegranates, its melons are something to discover. A remarkable local variety called *kadanai* is to be found in Spin Boldak.

However, the best Afghan melons are almost unanimously attributed to come from Kunduz. This place, together with the neighbouring provinces of Baghlan and Takhar (with which it roughly covers the historical region called Qataghan) and other northern provinces such as Balkh, Samangan and Jowzjan, constitute the main producers of melons in the country.

Ancient varieties of melons for Central Asia and Afghanistan given by the Baburnamah*** or the 'Ain-e Akbari (a gazetteer written under Akbar's reign) include the *nashpati* (as the name says, pear-like), *dud-e cheragh* (lantern's smoke, usually a poetic *tòpos*), *barg-e nai*, *babashaiki*, *alisheri*, *mir teimuri*, *alchah* and the small *khosravi*. Nowadays, it seems that only the *barg-e nai* has survived in Afghanistan, at least with the ancient denomination. It is a medium-sized variety found in Baghlan and Kunduz, with a greenish-blackish skin which is distinctively tender and delicate, like the reed's leaves whose name it bears.

But there are plenty of melons of different shapes, sizes and names hitting the market today. Some of the most famous varieties in the Afghan north, from where, arguably, the best melons in the world originate, are:

– *sawzmaghz*, as the name hints, it is a green melon, thirst-quenching and not unduly sweet, AAN agrees that it must be the one that carried away sanity of mind from many foreigners once they first tasted it.

– *sawzmaghz-e khadai*, a sub-variety of the previous one, extremely elongated and sweet.

– *zormati*, a bright yellow melon from Kunduz, of a medium round size and imparting a remarkable scent of flowers to the palate.

– *qashoqi*, a big, pale yellow variety from Balkh, characterized by the softness of its pulp, literally to be eaten with a spoon.

– *kandak*, a small melon grown on *lalmi* (rainfed) hillsides in Baghlan, it ripens early and is very juicy.

– *kandak-e Deh Wairan*, a similar variety grown in the namesake hamlet of Kunduz province.

– *arkani*, also called *qoter*, originating from both Balkh area and Qataghan, its skin, incredibly thick and resistant, allows for it to be stored for winter or transported easily.

Actually, the number of varieties of melon in Afghanistan have been estimated at 38. And then, there are more trivial, yellow melons, generically termed *zerahati* 'agricultural', almost to imply that the production of the special melon varieties mentioned above amounts to an artistic accomplishment. *Zerahatis* are massively produced almost everywhere, as they require less efforts and give better yields, and consumed by less affluent sectors of the population. It is not a secret that the best of the Qataghani production is conveyed to the Kabul market.

Here, tons of melons (and water melons) are unloaded, piled and sold everyday. The bustling market is however mainly oriented at the internal consumption, as only a fraction of the melons that reach Kabul are exported. Remarkably, what the Mughals could achieve four centuries ago is now proving impossible for three states, at least two of which, Pakistan and India, claim some degree of continuity with the Mughal past. India, for both demographic and climatic reasons, has a bigger demand for Afghan melons than Pakistan, and those melons (estimated at 20 per cent of those which reached Kabul in 2007) that get out of the country are mainly headed for there. As the trade passes through Pakistan, it is unfortunately subjected to all the obstacles and delays that the lack of a proper implementation of the APTTA causes (see our previous blog [here](#))

Since 2006, a vicious parasite, the Baluchistan Melon Fly (*Myiopardalis Pardalina*), has spread into northern Afghanistan from across the border with Uzbekistan (actually proceeded round the country's borders to Herat in the 1970 and then came from south-west to the melon fields of northern Afghanistan. With its despicable habit of attacking melons and spoiling them from the inside, this bug has caused huge economic losses to the cultivators in the first years of its appearance (read an IPWR 2009 report [here](#)). Campaigns to reduce it have met with only limited success and it is still a common sight that of heaps of melons affected by the parasite rotting at the side of the roads in the Afghan North.

And then, even when trade is not hampered by political handicaps or pests, it is not blessed by the exchange rate anymore. The export of Afghan melons was doing good at the time of the Taleban, because the Pakistani rupee's value was much higher than that of the Afghani. This is not the case anymore and the situation is taking a heavy toll on the competitiveness of Afghanistan's products.

So, nowadays only some export of *sawzmaghz* melons goes on with Pakistan, and the tough *arkanis* travel somehow as far as India or the Gulf countries. But it could be possible to develop quality standards and bring back the Afghan melon, and other fruits for that, to its age-old status-symbol role and widespread circulation. With a minimum of quality control and improved storage, packaging and transportation, hopefully in ten years all middle or upper class households in Pakistan and India somehow proud of their family heritage would be *morally compelled* to sport Afghan melons on their tables.

This would not provide the billions of dollars needed to finance the current *tashkil* planned for the Afghan security forces, but could guarantee a decent livelihood for many rural Afghans who would, otherwise, face the need of pursuing different, less law-abiding careers.

But, hold on, for according to some melon specialists there are good chances for an increased availability of Afghan melons in foreign and distant lands, although in a completely different scenario. Here for example is the astounding commentary that a blogger reserved for the Afghan green melon (referring to the *sawzmaghz* – check it [here](#)) on his food website:

I haven't seen these for awhile, but they're sure to become more common in the future. When the U.S. pulls the troupes (sic) out of Afghanistan anyone who cooperated will have to leave the country and they'll head straight for Los Angeles where every other ethnic group has settled. Soon they'll be opening restaurants and demanding Afghan melons in the markets.

After such a fine piece of political analysis, maybe we should all go back to grow melons in the fields, and leave our unfinished papers to rot under the sun.

* Also, the period taken fit with the official data reported by Frye in his monograph 'The Afghanistan Economy: Money, Finance and the Critical Constraints to Economic Development', published in 1974. The predominance of fruit exports in the Afghan trade continued well into the 1980s and is nowadays seen by many as a vital asset for the country's economic stability.

** The Baburnamah, the Memoirs of Jahangir and the 'Ain-e Akbari, from which this and the following excerpts are given, are available online at the website <http://persian.packhum.org/persian/main>

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