

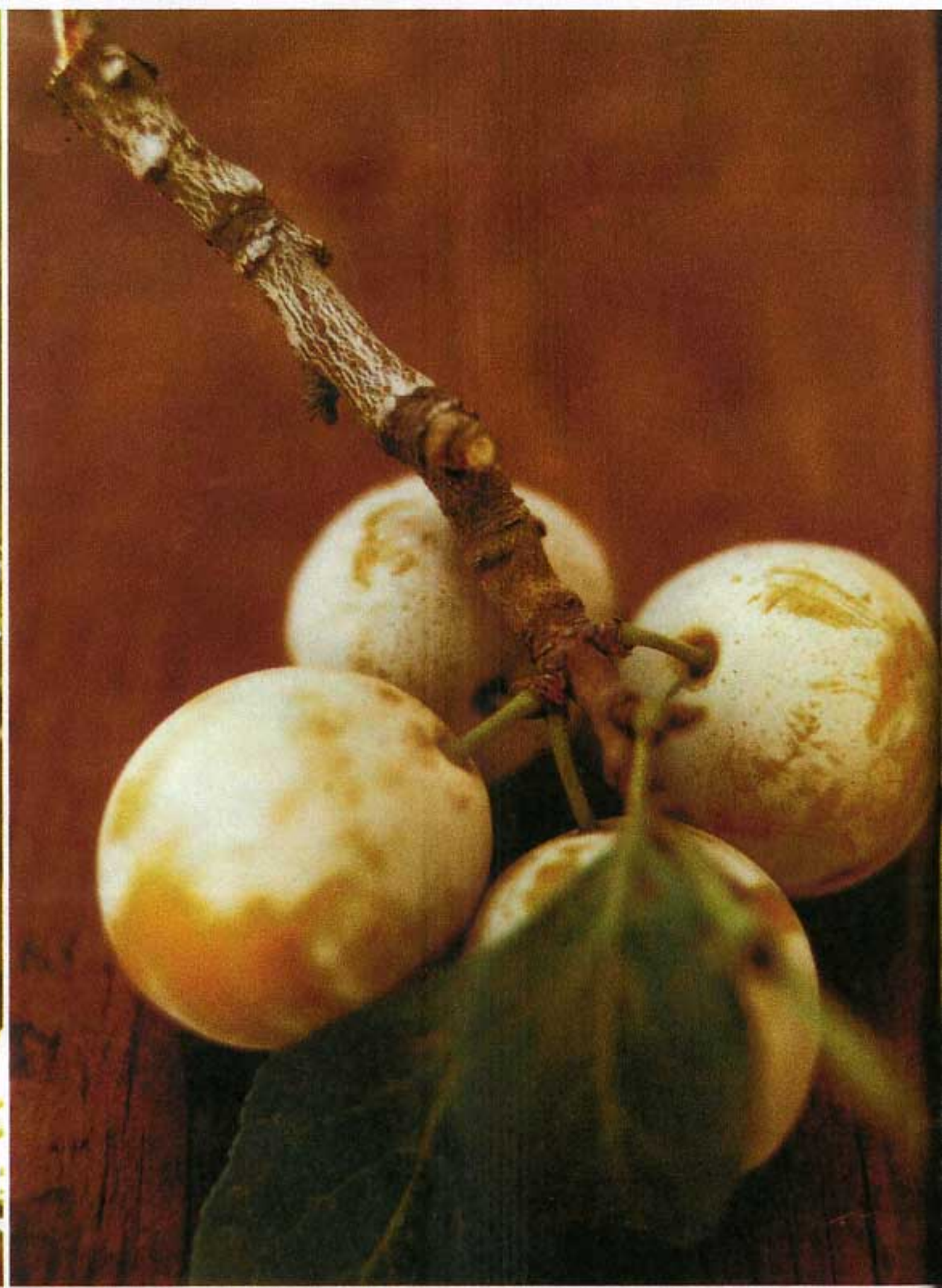
The Inca plum, shown in bloom and ready for picking, has a dense texture and a particularly "plummy" taste.

ORCHARD OF DREAMS

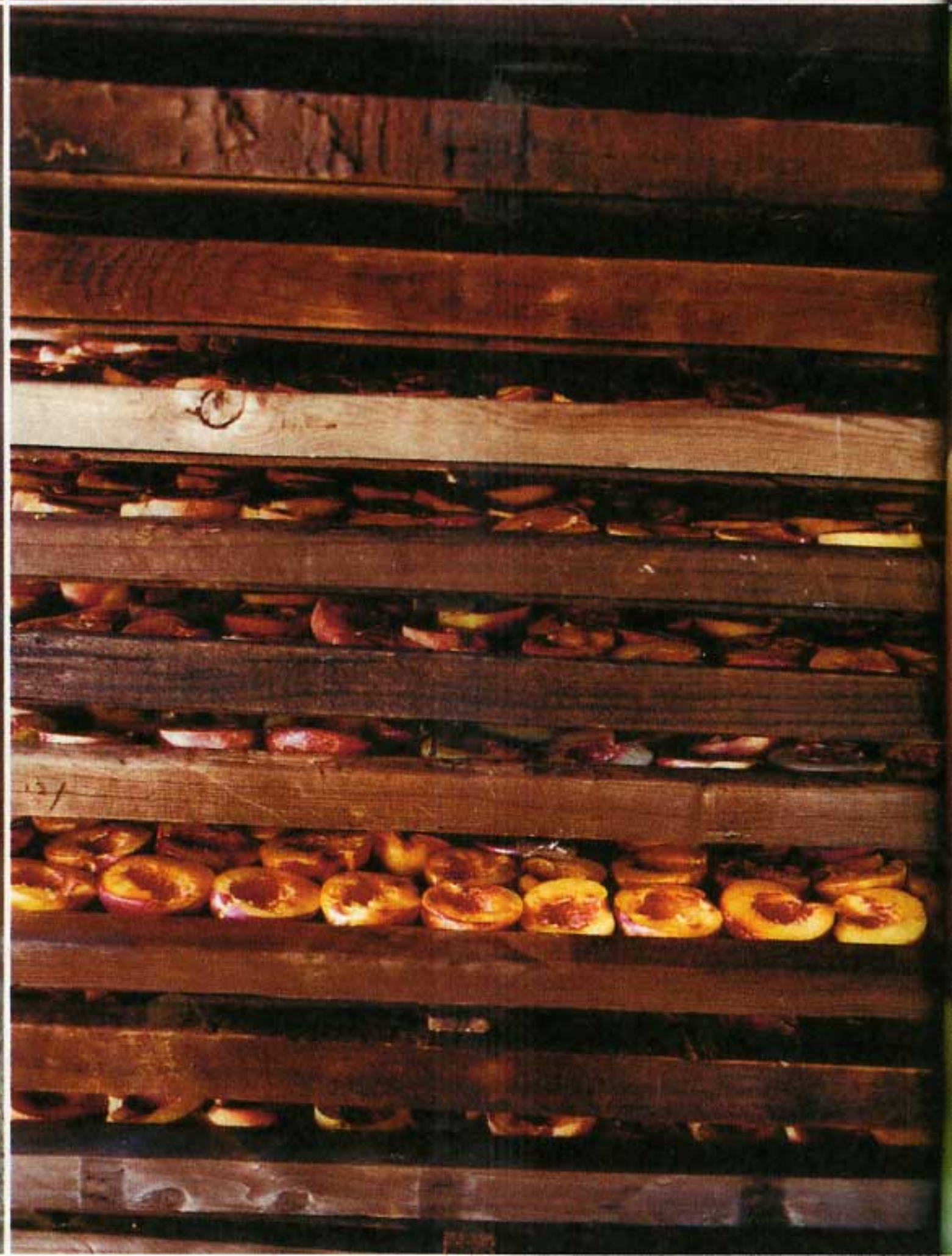
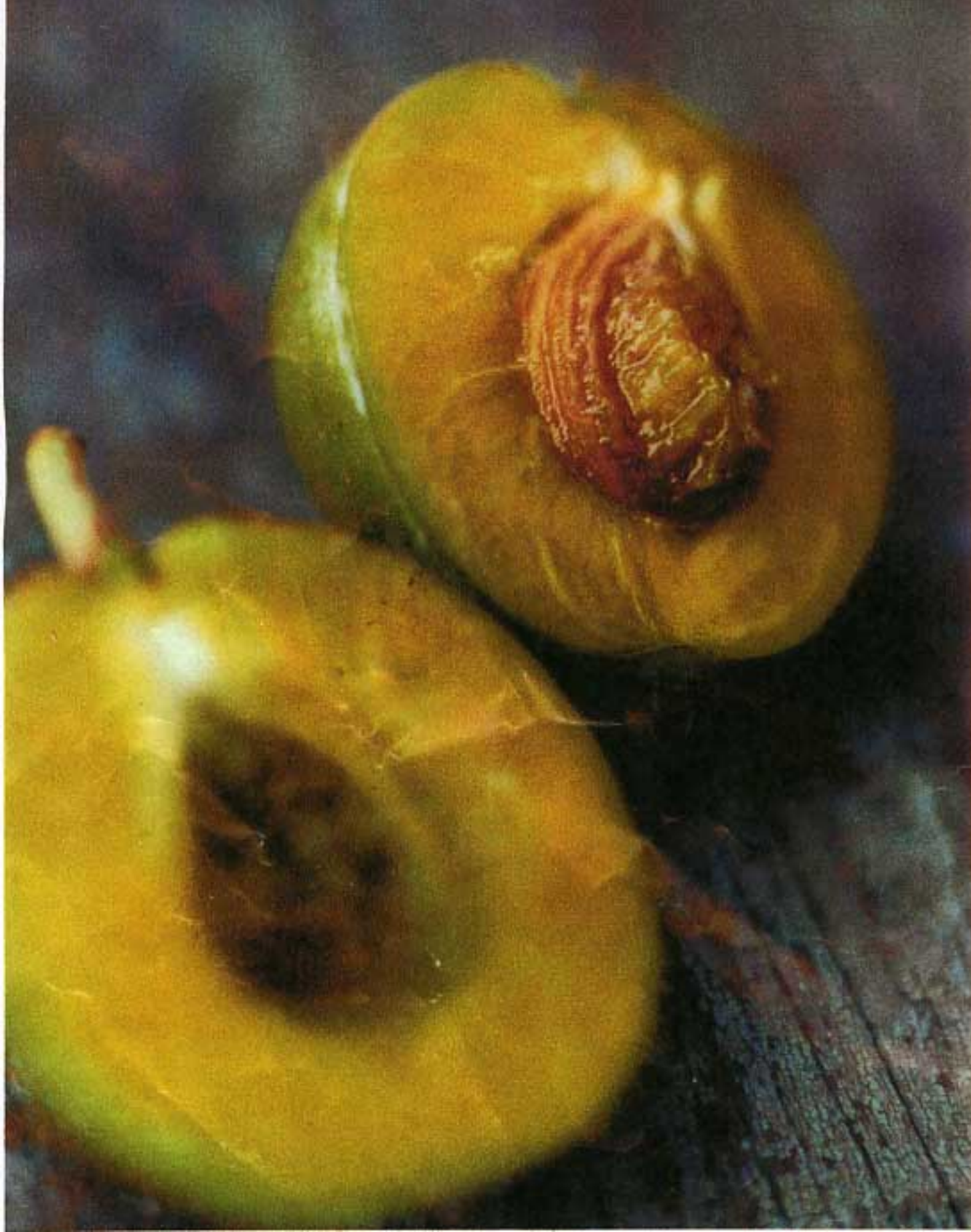
WITH 250 VARIETIES, ANDY MARIANT'S
ORCHARD OF STONE FRUIT IS PART
LOST WORLD, PART **FUTURE WORLD**,
AND ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT

BY DAVID KARP PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID LAURIDSEN



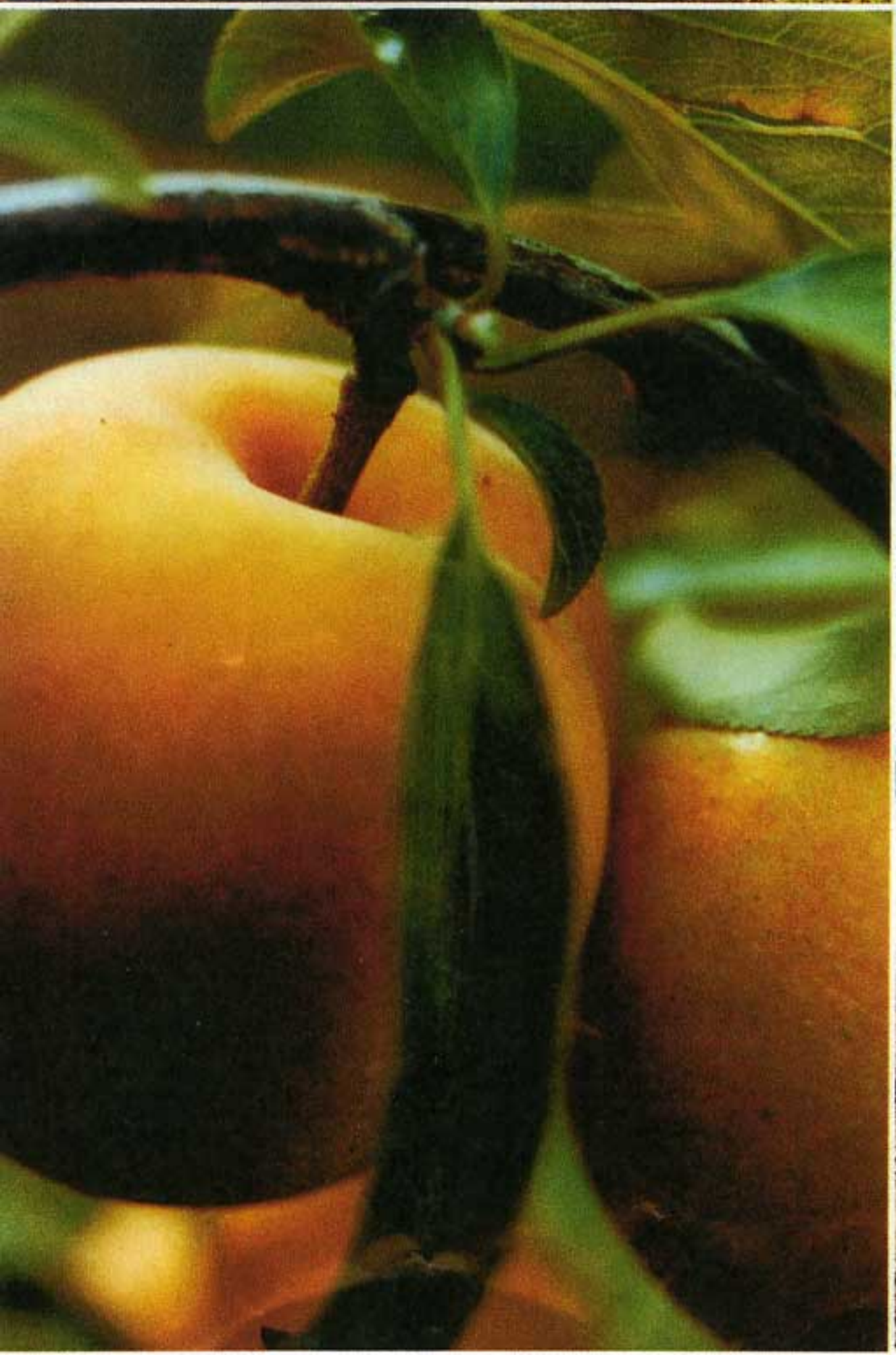


Clockwise from top left: Picking cherries; Mirabelle de Nancy plums; plums in blossom; Geo Pride Pluot; ladders stacked at day's end; Padre plums; drying nectarines and peaches; Bavay's greengage plum.





MARIAN'S BABY CRAWFORD PEACH
HAS AN UNMATCHED INTENSITY OF
FLAVOR. HIS SILVER LOGAN DENSE,
BUTTERY FLESH.



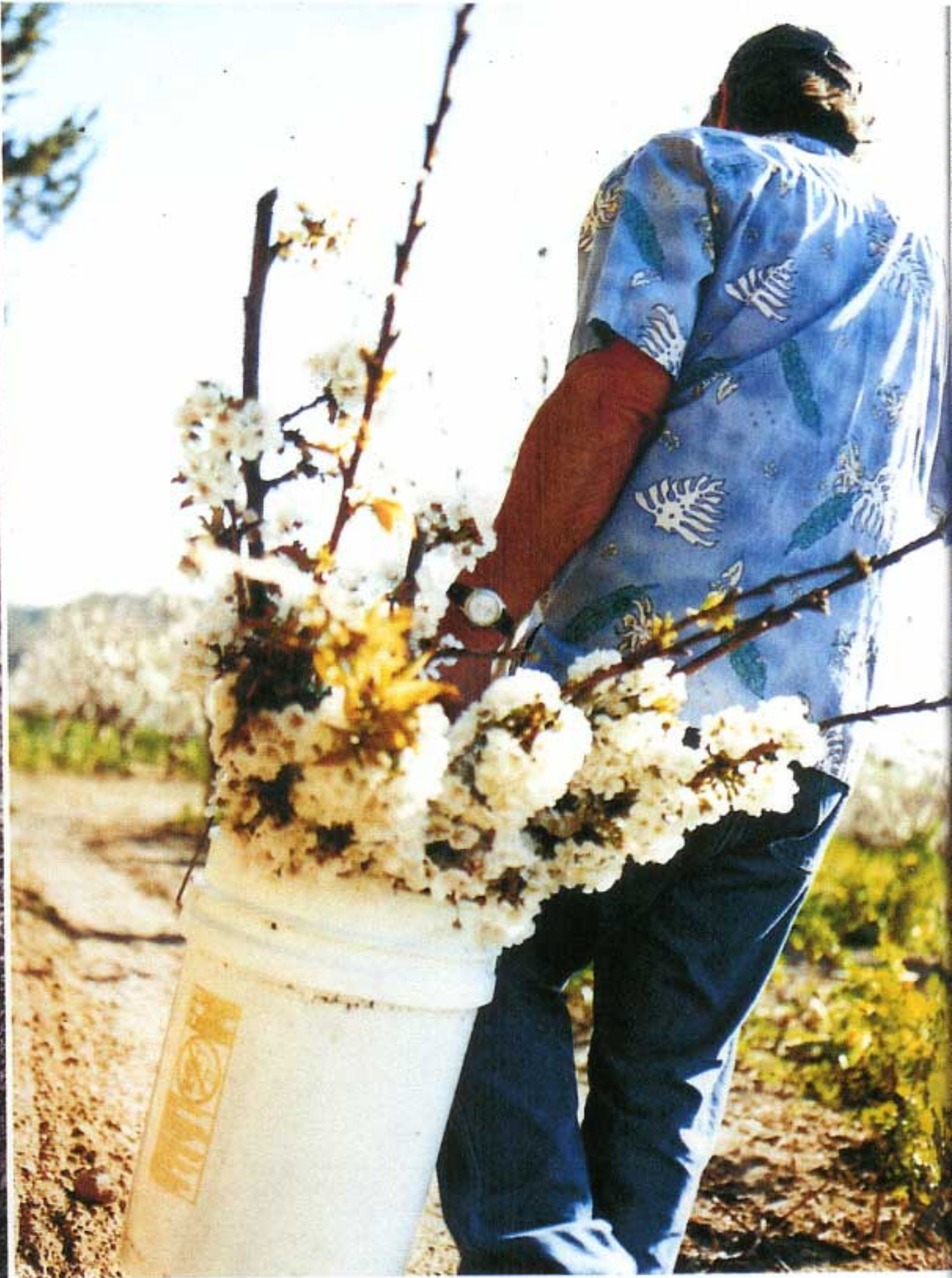




THERE ARE **HUGE BING CHERRIES.**
SUGARY RAINIERS SO RIPE THEIR SKINS
ARE SOLID RED, AND DAINTY COE'S
TRANSPARENTS THAT REVEAL THEIR
STONES WHEN HELD UP TO THE LIGHT.



HAVING A NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE
MADE MARIANI FOCUS ON WHAT
WAS IMPORTANT—THE LAND.



IN 1969, WHEN ANDY MARIANI was 23 years old, he was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disease. “Take him home,” the doctors told his parents. “He’s going to die.”

Perhaps farmers, like fruit, develop best under difficult conditions. Today, Mariani’s fruit farm in a fertile corner of Central California—which he grew amid crippling trials that continue to plague him—is considered by many to be the finest in the nation.

In late spring he might have 35 kinds of cherries for his visitors to taste. There are huge, firm Bings and sugary Rainiers so ripe their skins are solid red; Black Tartarians, Mariani’s favorites, small and soft, with a subtle blackberry flavor; Black Republicans, dark, winy, and concentrated, with a hint of bitter almond; and Coe’s Transparents, dainty pale-salmon fruits that reveal their stones when held up to the light.

In late July or early August, Mariani harvests his signature peach, the Baby Crawford, with its deep orange-yellow skin and unmatched intensity of flavor. (Mariani salvaged it from a university breeder’s reject pile; today there is a waiting list of customers eager for it.) He also delights in showing off a few genuine heirlooms, like the Pallas, an oval-shaped honey peach with exquisitely juicy and tender white flesh, which originated in Georgia in 1878.

White-fleshed peaches and nectarines with the traditional balance of sweetness and acidity are hard to find in stores because they are so delicate that each touch leaves a fingerprint. But Mariani grows a prime example, the Silver Logan, which has a fruity vanilla aroma, dense, buttery flesh, and a complex, well-balanced, lingering flavor.

For Mariani, this all represents a return to his youth. In the

mid-’40s, when he was born in San Jose, cherry, apricot, and prune orchards blanketed the surrounding Santa Clara Valley, which was known as the Valley of Heart’s Delight. Mariani’s own family had 18 acres planted with apricots and prunes, and though his Yugoslavian-immigrant father worked as a commercial fisherman, his dad’s real passion was for the land.

Growing up, Mariani adored working on the farm, but because family tradition dictated that the business be handed down to the eldest son, he earned a master’s degree in public administration and then took a position as assistant manager for the City of Saratoga. He had already been diagnosed with his autoimmune disease at that point, and hoped the job would help him cope.

Unwilling to accept the doctors’ death sentence, the Marianis sent their son off to Vienna, to a doctor known for his unconventional techniques—an aggressive combination of corticosteroids, antibiotics, and dermatological surgery. Over the course of the next nine years, Mariani made several trips to Europe, and by 1981 he was surviving without medication. That year he turned 36, and his disease went into remission, where it has remained ever since.

During his ordeal, Mariani returned to the family farm. Having a near-death experience, he says, made him focus on what was really important—and he decided that for him it was working the land. Though his excruciating pain prevented him from putting in a full day’s work in the orchards, he would labor for hours over a small garden. “I went down to the basics,” he says, “growing tomatoes and flowers. It was therapy farming.”

He also took horticulture classes and schooled himself in soils and irrigation, and before long he was introducing ex-

otic fruit varieties into the orchard. Eventually, Mariani was able to go to work on the horticultural aspects of the family business, Mariani Orchards, while his older brother Mitch handled marketing and finances. For two decades, the two managed to withstand the economic pressures that forced so many of their peers to sell to developers as the Valley of Heart's Delight turned into Silicon Valley.

Morgan Hill, where Andy Mariani lives, enjoys an ideal climate for growing stone fruit. Daytime highs in the summer average 87 degrees, warm enough to ripen the fruit but not so hot that photosynthesis shuts down (as often happens in the broiling Central Valley, where most of the nation's stone fruit is grown), and nights are cool enough for the trees to respire, allowing the fruit to stay on the tree longer and develop a fuller flavor.

BUT CLIMATE CAN ONLY TAKE FRUIT

so far; the rest is up to the farmer. The affable Mariani, who is today as tall and sturdy as one of his trees, says that over the years he's developed "a certain feel for the land, for what it can and cannot do. There are decisions that you make on a day-to-day basis to create much better fruit." Mariani insists on picking all of his fruit truly tree ripe. He harvests each variety five to seven times a season (versus two for commercial growers), and by picking daily, in small quantities, is usually able to avoid refrigeration, which dulls the flavor of most stone fruit. Growing in small batches also enables Mariani to personally supervise his veteran crew in the countless decisions that create great fruit, giving instructions for the pruning, thinning, and irrigation of each variety.

Widely regarded as a horticultural wizard, Mariani is as well versed in the latest scientific discoveries as he is in classic pomological literature. "If there's anybody more knowledgeable, I don't know where he is," says Charlie Olson, a local grower and a longtime friend of Mariani's. "Andy lives, breathes, and talks fruit."

Unfortunately, Mariani has had to concern himself with more than just fruit. By the time he'd got his health under

control, there were other problems to contend with. His brother gained financial control of the farm in 1979, and over time their relationship became tense. In early 2003, Mariani was cut adrift from the family business altogether. "He was totally lost," says Olson.

And so, later that year, he took a huge gamble. With the help of Olson (who had made a bundle when he leased out his own land), Mariani leased the largest parcel of the family farm from his estranged brother, and called it Andy's Orchard.

Today, the 45-acre farm is home to some 250 varieties of cherries, peaches, nectarines, apricots, and plums (including what I believe to be the most intensely delicious fruit in the world, the tender, honey-flavored European greengage plum). Mariani sells some fruit through commercial shippers and local, regional, and farmers markets, and other kinds only at his on-site store. (In a drying yard behind his packing shed, he also produces fabulously meaty, flavorful dried apricots, peaches, and nectarines.) Unlike many growers, who have tried to boost their businesses through "family entertainment," Mariani spurns things like hay rides and petting zoos. "This is a working farm," he says. "It's not Disneyland."

But necessity dictates that Mariani's orchard is no museum, either. "I have to tread a fine line," he says, "between what I can do and what the ideal is." He dislikes the current style of all-red-skinned, crunchy, low-acid peaches and nectarines, but some of his favorite varieties are recent, such as Zee Lady, a yellow peach with a rich, classic taste. "I select fruit for flavor," he says, "whether it's an heirloom or modern variety."

Despite everything, Mariani remains undaunted. He lives frugally and spends seven days a week among his trees. Nobody's quite sure whether he'll be able to continue this way (Olson: "My brain says no, but my heart says yes"), but given how much he's overcome, the odds look pretty good.

Andy's Orchard sells fresh fruit at its country store and dried fruit by mail order, and also conducts regular educational tours and tastings. (1615 Half Road, Morgan Hill; 408-782-7600; andysorchard.com).

NECTARINE SALSA

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

Active time: 15 min **Start to finish:** 1¼ hr

We like to serve this fresh salsa with grilled fish, chicken, or pork, or as a dip for tortilla chips.

- 3 ripe large nectarines (1 to 1¼ lb total), pitted and chopped**
- ½ cup chopped white onion**
- 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice**
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh serrano chile, including seeds**
- 1 teaspoon finely chopped fresh cilantro**
- 1 teaspoon sugar**
- ¼ teaspoon salt**

► Stir together all ingredients and let stand at room temperature, stirring

occasionally, 1 hour, to allow flavors to develop.

PLUM CARPACCIO

SERVES 6 (DESSERT)

Active time: 15 min **Start to finish:** 2¼ hr

Simple but elegant, this dessert makes a refreshing finale to dinner on a hot summer evening.

- 1¼ lb firm-ripe black or red plums (about 4), halved lengthwise and pitted**
- ⅔ cup sugar**
- ⅔ cup water**
- 1 (3-inch-long) fresh rosemary sprig**
- 2 tablespoons slivovitz (plum brandy) or grappa**

Special equipment: an adjustable-blade slicer

► Put slicer in a 13- by 9-inch shallow baking dish. Starting with cut side down, slice each plum into near-paper-thin rounds.

► Bring sugar, water, and rosemary to a boil in a small saucepan over moderately high heat, stirring until sugar is dissolved. Remove from heat and stir in slivovitz, then pour hot syrup over plums. Let macerate at room temperature, gently stirring occasionally, until plums are translucent and softened, about 2 hours.

► Divide plums among 6 plates, overlapping slices slightly, then drizzle with some syrup.

Cooks' note:

Plums can macerate, covered and chilled, up to 1 day. ☞