

*John McPhee went to Florida to research the state's famous fruit and encountered some surprising attitudes about fresh orange juice and concentrate, which is made by adding water to frozen "concentrated" juice. Read this excerpt from *Oranges* and answer the questions that follow.*

from **ORANGES**

by John McPhee

1 About a mile south of the Georgia-Florida line on U.S. 301, on a day as hot as summer although it was in fact the first day of spring, I stopped at the Florida Welcome Station to try some of the free orange juice that was proclaimed on a sign outside. A good-looking redheaded girl handed me a three-ounce cup of reconstituted concentrate. It was good concentrate, as I remember, but I felt a little nonplussed.¹ After driving for some hours, I found myself on Interstate 75 near Leesburg, in Lake County, where the Ridge begins. The Ridge is the Florida Divide, the peninsular watershed, and, to hear Floridians describe it, the world's most stupendous mountain range after the Himalayas and the Andes. Soaring two hundred and forty feet into the sub-tropical sky, the Ridge is difficult to distinguish from the surrounding lowlands, but it differs more in soil condition than in altitude, and citrus trees cover it like a long streamer, sometimes as little as a mile and never more than twenty-five miles wide, running south, from Leesburg to Sebring, for roughly a hundred miles. It is the most intense concentration of citrus in the world. The Ridge alone outproduces Spain and Italy. Its trees, planted in rows determined by surveyors' transits, are so perfectly laid out that their patterns play games with your eyes. The trees are dark and compact, like rows of trimmed giant boxwoods, usually about fifteen or twenty feet high. On the Ridge, as in the Indian River section of eastern Florida, citrus plantations are called groves; in California, they are generally called orchards. Citrus trees are evergreen, and in the ancient world they were coveted for their beauty long before anyone ever thought to eat their fruit. Of all the descriptions of them that I have ever run across, the one I prefer is contained in these three lines by an eighth-century Chinese poet:

In the full of spring on the banks of a river—
Two big gardens planted with thousands of orange trees.
Their thick leaves are putting the clouds to shame.

The poet's name was Tu Fu, and he had so much confidence in his writing that he prescribed it as a cure for malaria. Beyond those three lines, I am unfamiliar with Tu Fu's canon.² But I believe in him. Or at least I did that morning at the beginning of the Ridge, where the orange trees were shaming the clouds, and the air was sedative with the aroma of blossoms. Valencia

¹ *nonplussed* — perplexed

² *canon* — body of literary work

trees, unlike all other orange trees, are in bloom and in fruit at the same time. So most of the trees in every direction were white and green and orange all at once.

2 After leaving Interstate 75, I noticed a sign on a roadside eating place that had originally said, “FRESH ORANGE JUICE”; the word “fresh” had been painted over with white paint but was still showing through. I dropped in briefly at the Florida Citrus Commission, in Lakeland, and was invited to have a cup of orange juice, which came out of a dispenser in the front lobby. It was concentrate.

3 While I was there, I heard the story of the day they first demonstrated the fresh-juice machine that was used in the Florida Pavilion at the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair. The thing was set up in the Citrus Commission lobby, filled with fresh oranges, and switched on. As it began to split the oranges and squeeze out pitcher after pitcher full of fresh orange juice, word spread through the building, and employees of the Citrus Commission poured out of their offices and into the lobby, where they drank every drop the machine produced. The next day the machine was crated and sent to New York. People at the Citrus Commission were still talking about it more than a year later, and probably they still are. “Drinking that juice was a real novelty,” one man told me. “It was a real party. Everybody was smiling.”

4 In Winter Haven, which is on the Ridge and about equidistant from either end, I took a room in a motel on the edge of an orange grove. Next door was a restaurant, with orange trees, full of fruit, spreading over its parking lot. I went in for dinner, and, since I would be staying for some time and this was the only restaurant in the neighborhood, I checked on the possibility of fresh juice for breakfast. There were never any requests for fresh orange juice, the waitress explained, apparently unmindful of the one that had just been made. “Fresh is either too sour or too watery or too something,” she said. “Frozen is the same every day. People want to know what they’re getting.” She seemed to know her business, and I began to sense what turned out to be the truth—that I might as well stop asking for fresh orange juice, because few restaurants in Florida serve it.

5 At the next table was a couple who overheard my exchange with the waitress and started a conversation with me. They told me that they lived in Plant City, a town about twenty miles away, and that they had an orange grove on their property, with three kinds of oranges, so that ripe fruit was on their trees almost eight months of the year. All year long, they said, they drank concentrate at breakfast. They hadn’t made juice from the fruit on their trees for more than ten years.

6 After dinner, I drove downtown, and in a hardware store I found a plastic orange reamer on a bottom shelf. I bought a knife, too, and went back to the place on the edge of the orange grove. I picked several oranges, squeezed them, and poured the juice into a tall glass. I had what I wanted, but it had been a long day.