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The Fabulous Brazil-Nut



by MAURICE PAUL

Few who eat this familiar delicacy know the fascinating story of adventure and danger behind it

IT WAS FEBRUARY, 1942—summer in Brazil—and three men were sipping drinks outside a cafe in São Paulo when the waiter set a plate of large, oval-shaped, creamy white nuts on the table before them. One of the men reached for a nut and nibbled experimentally at a corner.

“Why, this is delicious!” he said. “What is it called, waiter?”

“I am not certain, *señhor*, it is a new nut,” the waiter replied. “I believe it is called the English-nut.”

“No, it is the American-nut,” the second man insisted. “I remember seeing them at Christmas time when I was in New York.”

The third man was equally sure he had tasted them when he attended the Industrial Fair at Leipzig and that they were called German-nuts.

Strange as it may seem, the nut is called everything by South Americans except the name the rest of the world uses—the Brazil-nut. And there are still millions of Brazilians

who have never tasted, seen or heard of it.

Although the Brazil-nut is the only product exported by Brazil which bears that country's name as part of its own, it has been consumed in the country of its origin under the impression that it is a foreign importation.

The reason for this seeming contradiction, itself, sounds contradictory. The nut has been consistently exported to Great Britain, Germany and other European countries since 1633. After World War II, a large share of the annual crop was shipped to the United States, as well, where, as in other countries, the raw nuts were shelled and re-shipped throughout the world.

When World War II compelled the allies to use all their available shipping space for vital war materials, traders in the nut set up their own shelling plants and began introducing the Brazil-nut to more Brazilians.

The Brazil-nut is the world's most

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fabulous nut—fabulous in the manner of its growth, its gathering, its distribution and the perils associated with bringing it out of the Amazon jungle where it thrives.

Actually, it is not a nut at all but the seed of the Brazil-nut tree. The fruit from which it is derived resembles a coconut in size and shape and has an exceedingly hard, woody outer shell about one quarter of an inch thick.

This pod weighs two to four pounds, and is so hard and durable that an iron-rimmed cartwheel may run over it and still not crack it. The native Indians use the pods as pots, pans and drinking vessels.

The Brazil-nut tree is the giant of the Amazon rain-country. It grows straight up for about 150 feet to stand like a sentinel above the roof of the tropic forest. Its circumference reaches about six feet at the base and it sends out no branches until it has towered above all the other surrounding trees. This tremendous height, girth and lack of branches makes it almost impossible

to climb.

The tree usually grows in small clumps and is especially abundant near rivers and streams—the only means of transportation in the comparatively railroadless Amazon valley.

About 12 to 25 seeds, each in its own woody container, are compactly nested together inside each pod like the segments of an orange. Once removed, they can never again be replaced as snugly as nature had originally ordered them.

Aside from its use as a food, the Brazil-nut is crushed to express its valuable oil which is used by the natives for cooking and illumination. More and more uses for the nut are being sought in recently-built laboratories in Brazil.

Although the Dutch were shipping the "wild oil fruit" out of the country more than three centuries ago, nobody has ever successfully "domesticated" the Brazil-nut tree in the western hemisphere. Some experts believe that the *cotia*, the Amazonian hare, is chiefly responsible for the propagation of the giant trees. The little animal instinctively gathers fallen nuts and buries them throughout the depths of the forest, thus helping to germinate new growth throughout the years. Nobody knows how many millions of the trees there are in inaccessible parts of the jungle.

The Brazil-nut tree grows about one foot in its first year and then shoots up another 20 feet in the next four years. The mature tree produces creamy white flowers, somewhat like our hydrangeas, a

year before the fruit appears. Thus, the blossoms for next year's fruit are on the trees while the current year's fruit is hanging from the branches. A tree will yield a half-ton of nuts in a single season.

Native Indian nut-gatherers, called *castanheiros*, collect the pods after the high winds of year's end hurl them to the jungle floor with the fury of a cannon barrage. It would be worth the life of a *castanheiro* to be near a tree when the pods are falling.

But that is not the only danger he faces when he starts into the jungle to seek out the giant trees. The innumerable rivers and tributaries of the Amazon country swarm with the voracious *piranha*, the world's fiercest fish. So vicious are these fish that they will rise suddenly from the bottom of a river and literally lunge out of the water to bite off a finger, hand or toe. A school of them has been known to reduce a man to a skeleton in less than five minutes.

In the shallow water near the

river bank lurks the dreaded electric eel, a three-footer monster capable of fatally shocking a human being with its powerful electrical discharge.

On the bank, the nut gatherer must look carefully about him lest he serve as a repast for the 18-foot water boa, the jaguar and the 20-foot anaconda which can crush a man in a moment.

At night, when the nut-gatherer tries to get some sleep, he must remain alert to all these dangers plus a new menace—the vampire bat. If he ignores that curiously cool, tickling sensation in his foot, he may be so drained of blood as to perish in his jungle bed.

The greatest irony of all is that quite often the *castanheiro* manages to survive all these perils only to be killed by a falling pod. Yet, with the coming of each season, they enter once again on their rounds of death to gather the fabulous Brazil-nut which, until after World War II, many Brazilians had never heard of, never saw and never tasted.



 **Coronet** 

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