

A Roasted Chestnut

Roasted chestnuts are almost unknown in the U.S. since the blight fungus (*Endothia parasitica*) showed up in Central Park in New York City in 1904. From there, it went on to kill every native American chestnut tree from Maine to Georgia, billions of them. The story of chestnut blight inspired me to a lifetime of work with tree insect and disease problems. Louisiana is located outside the natural range of chestnut; but, the closest isolated native stands grew in Pearl River County, Miss. We do not roast chestnuts as part of our native culture. But, other people do. After a half century of careful breeding with the resistant Chinese chestnut, blight resistant straight, American type trees are beginning to reappear and bear delicious fruit in Louisiana. These nuts are from the Dunstan variety from a grove in Wilson, just south of Norwood in East Feliciana Parish. Otherwise, the very few American nuts are all being exported to Korea where they fetch a handsome price. The crop that is sold in grocery stores during the holiday season are European chestnuts, imported from Italy. They sell for over \$5 a pound – if you can get them. Often, they are stale, moldy or infested with weevils after lying around a month in transit. Blight resistant American x Chinese and European x Japanese and presumed resistant Americans are beginning to enter the nursery trade. This winter, I will be planting up to 300 of these trees, 8 cultivars from 4 nurseries from all over the U.S. The new orchard will be located in that sweet spot of the natural range – Poplarville, Pearl River County, Mississippi.

European chestnuts were spread across the continent by the Roman army, with the expansion of the Roman empire. When the Romans conquered Illyria (modern Yugoslavia), they brought the trees with them. Growing up in the Austro-Hungarian province of Bosnia-Herzegovina and later, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, my dad would tell tales from the old country while roasting chestnuts for me. The smell of the roasting nuts and their sweet taste would evoke the memories of old Sarajevo.

2. CASTANEA Adans. Chestnut.

Trees or shrubs, with furrowed bark, porous brittle wood, durable in the ground, terete branchlets without terminal buds, axillary buds covered by 2 pairs of slightly imbricated scales, the outer lateral, the others accrescent, becoming oblong-ovate and acute and marking the base of the branch with narrow ring-like scars, and stout perpendicular tap-roots; producing when cut numerous stout shoots from the stump. Leaves convolute in the bud.

Castanea is confined to the northern hemisphere, and is widely distributed through eastern North America, southern Europe, northern Africa, southwestern Asia, and central and northern China, Korea, and Japan. Seven species are distinguished. In the countries of the Mediterranean Basin much attention has been given to improving the fruit of the native species *Castanea sativa* Mill., which is occasionally planted in the middle United States; in Japan the seeds of *Castanea crenata* S. & Zucc. in many varieties and in China those of *Castanea mollissima* Bl. are important articles of food. Castanea produces coarse-grained wood very durable in contact with the soil, and rich in tannin. Chestnut-trees suffer in the eastern United States from the attacks of a fungus, *Endothia parasitica* Anders. which has nearly exterminated them in many parts of the country.

Castanea is the classical name of the Chestnut-tree.

1. *Castanea dentata* Borkh. Chestnut.

Leaves oblong-lanceolate, acute and long-pointed at apex, gradually narrowed and cuneate at base, when they unfold puberulous on the upper surface and clothed on the lower with fine cobweb-like tomentum, at maturity thin, glabrous, dark dull yellow-green above, pale yellow-green below, 6'-8' long, about 2' wide, with a pale yellow midrib and



Fig. 216

shell lined with thick rufous tomentum; seed very sweet.

A tree, occasionally 100' high, with a tall straight columnar trunk 3'-4' in diameter, or often when uncrowded by other trees with a short trunk occasionally 10'-12' in diameter, and usually divided not far above the ground into 3 or 4 stout horizontal limbs forming a broad low round-topped head of slightly pendulous branches frequently 100' across, and nuts, which are superior to those of the Old World chestnuts in sweetness were formerly gathered in great quantities in the forest and sold in the markets of the eastern cities.

Distribution. Southern Maine to Woodstock, Grafton County, New Hampshire (rare) and to the valley of the Winooski River, Vermont, southern Ontario, and southern Michigan, southward to Delaware and Ohio, southern Indiana, and southwestern Illinois (Pulaski County) along the Appalachian Mountains up to altitudes of 4000' to northern Georgia, and to western Florida (Crestview, Okaloosa County), southeastern (Henry and Dale Counties) and south central (Dallas County) Alabama, northern, central and southeastern Mississippi (Pearl River County), and to central Kentucky and Tennessee; very common on the glacial drift of the northern states and, except at the north, mostly confined to the Appalachian hills; attaining its greatest size in western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee.

Karlo Jüttner was a Viennese railroad engineer who worked on the narrow gauge line that connected towns in Bosnia- Herzegovina with the International line, the Orient Express, that connects Paris to Istanbul. He married Terezia Miklody, the daughter of a Hungarian nobleman from Sisak (an old Roman mint town) in 1890 and their six sons were born at Konjic, Zenica, Mostar and Sarajevo - all whistle stops along the railroad line. My father, Stjepan, was the fourth son, born in Zenica, a steel town, in 1904. The boys would buy hot, roasted chestnuts in paper cornucopias from the vendors in Bashcharshija Square in the old Muslim quarter of Sarajevo. The hot chestnuts contrasted to the tangy, cold autumn air.

On June 30th, 1914, Stjepan, was in Sarajevo when Franz Ferdinand, only surviving son of Emperor Franz Josef and archduke of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was shot by the Serb assassin, Gavrillo Princip. This single event touched off the horrors of World War I and almost a century of European warfare that followed



The Jüttner family in Sarajevo, 1914 Karlo, Jr.(1) Terezia, Stefi (4), Karlo in his railroad uniform, Velimir(5), Anton(6), Srechko (Felix)(3), an aunt, a cousin, Ferdo(2)

from: Sargent. 1905. Manual of the trees of North America V. 1.

By the fall of 1918, the war was lost, the Austro-Hungarian army and the economy were disintegrating. The boys had to scrounge for food and clothing for the coming harsh winter. Soldiers were discarding their weapons and munitions. Every day brought stories of kids being killed playing with guns and hand grenades. Stjepan went to the railroad station with a couple of Kronen in his pocket, looking for food. On a flatcar was a group of demoralized soldiers, trying to get home. One of them had, what looked like a sack of chestnuts. A few words were spoken and the two silver coins changed hands. The soldier threw down the sack and Stefi took it home. When the sack was opened, it was full of hollow oak galls. Worthless. Ashamed, hungry and scared, Stefi ran back with the sack. "You cheated me! Give me back my money!" he shouted. The soldier simply pointed his rifle at the boy and said: "Get away from here, or I'll kill you."

-----Well, these nuts are not worthless oak galls, they are not inedible horsechestnuts. They are the real thing. Enjoy!



Under a spreading chestnut tree in old Sarajevo, 1918, minaret in background

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