

Green Mangoes

In Uganda, green mangoes are eaten with salt. The combination is so acidic that even a slice will make your tongue curl – but impossibly, part of you will want to taste it again. You'll try another sliver, and the blinding, bitter reaction will repeat itself. But if you're doing it right, the Ugandans around you will already be handing you another slice.

At least, that's how it went for me. When I ate my first green mango, I was interviewing Deborah, an HIV-positive woman, at a clinic in Kampala. As the only American at the clinic, I stuck out pretty clearly – and on this particular day, the contrast wasn't working in my favor. Deborah had agreed to be interviewed, but she was hesitant. And rightly so, as we were near total strangers. But a few minutes into our conversation, a friend sat down on her left, pulling unripe mangoes from the plastic bag beneath her arm. Her children, the friend explained, had shaken the mangoes off a tree in her village, and she'd brought them to the clinic to share with those she'd meet.

The two women began to slice the mangoes, peeling the skin in perfect curlicues, and creating a delicate heap on the table. We got to talking about their children, their village, their husbands, their lives – and after a while, I pulled my notebook back out again. Deborah sprinkled a slice of mango with salt and handed it to me. Almost immediately, I yelled out in surprise, causing the women to roar with laughter. Eventually, so did I. All at once, we were just three women with a shocking – but shared – flavor on our tongues. We were trying to reach common ground, and despite our differences, I think we did.

From then on out, I've tried to find the green mangoes in every story I write. They are the elements that connect two cultures, and force a journalist and subject to see each other as who they are: people.

While interviewing a formerly incarcerated teenager in the Maldives, that green mango was a shared love of photography, and how she'd wake up just before sunrise to catch the rays on the waves. While interviewing a family of Afghan refugees, that green mango was a book of stickers, and the patterns their 3- and 5-year-old daughters would create on my recording equipment. While interviewing a transgender activist, that green mango became a walk in the park, where we explored discrimination in the health care system by digging into her personal story. Green mangoes are moments of human reckoning, and they are what journalism, at its roots, is all about.

Daniel Pearl understood the value of green mangoes more than anyone. Both through his work at the Wall Street Journal and outside of it, Daniel Pearl put himself out there – no matter the consequences – to bring truth, understanding, and connection to people around the world. He listened. He asked questions. And he told the stories that needed to be told. It's not always the easiest way to write a story, but it's the right way to be a journalist. As I go forward in my career, like Daniel, I'll be keeping green mangoes in mind.