

## Prize pickers



Citrons are fragile, sickly plants that are hard to grow and hard to find. With its rivers; rocky, fertile terrain; and stable temperatures, the area with the most sought-after citrons is Calabria, on southern Italy's Tyrrhenian coast near Cosenza, in the aptly titled Riviera dei Cedri (Citron Riviera).

For centuries now, every summer, from July to September, rabbis from around the globe come to the minuscule village of Santa Maria del Cedro to select the finest of the "majestic fruit" to bring back home.

As Professor Franco Galiano, president of the International Academy of the Citron, explains: "The fruit used in this religious ceremony must come from an ungrafted cutting which is in at least its fourth year of production". It must be "perfectly healthy, unspotted, with regular skin and beautiful to look at."

The rabbis start their days early to avoid the searing midday sun, making the rounds of the groves with the growers, selecting the fruit to be picked. The fruit is stored in a shed and in the evening wiped down with a sponge and inspected by the rabbis under a magnifying glass. The rabbis pay for all the fruit picked but discard all but the very best.

But these Calabrian citron groves risk extinction at the hands of crops that are more lucrative and easier to cultivate. In the 1960s, after the Italian citron plants were affected with a serious virus which threatened to exterminate them, farmers started grafting the plants that had survived on to the hardier wild orange tree.

A grove of 300 citron plants requires a team of four growers working nine months of the year on hands and knees (citron plants do not exceed 60 centimetres in height), while trying not to wound themselves on the plants' well-concealed but incredibly sharp thorns.

A grafted citron is expected to live more than 30 years: an ungrafted citron, only 10 to 15. Of the more-or-less 30 kilos of fruit the latter will produce a year, only one or two percent reach the perfection required for Jewish observance.

Yet, "pure" fruit can still be found. The seasoned rabbinic pickers know which are kosher. And though today many of the citron groves along the coast have given way to discos and holiday resorts, the remaining few are still inextricably linked with one of the most ancient and significant Jewish festivals.

