

# 'Mr. Virag' is cuckoo for cucuzz



IRENE VIRAG

This is a story about a man and a vegetable. The man is my husband, Harvey Aronson, but you can call him Mr. Virag because he says everybody else does. The vegetable is a cucuzz, which means "super long squash." Or you can add an "a" and call it cucuzza.

That's what the late, great Louis Prima did. He even wrote a song about it. Here are some lyrics:

*"Cucuzza grows in Italy  
They love it on the farm  
It's something like zucchini  
Flavored with Italian charm  
I call my girl Cucuzza 'cause  
she's sweet as she can be  
She loves to hear me say,  
'Cucuzza, please babotcha me'"*

Cucuzz, cucuzza — by any name this vegetable of Mediterranean origin evokes passion. Even Rampicante Zucchetta and Tromboncino, as it is also known, sound romantic. If you want to get to its roots, cucuzz belongs to the genus *Cucurbita* and its species is *moschata*, or winter squash, although it's frequently listed as *C. pepo* or summer squash. This is because it tastes best during the warm months, when it's still relatively small — measuring a mere eight to 18 inches long.

My husband prefers to call it cucuzz — pronounced ku-kooz with the accent on the last syllable. As names go, it conveys a sense of zest and virility fitting for a plant that — in terms of both fruit and vines — grows like wild.

Cucuzz can be big — really big. When we first planted it in our garden, we weren't sure what it was other than some

kind of squash. We tried two plants — one on either side of an arbor, and it turned into a case of vines gone wild. If we hadn't trimmed them back, they would have taken over the arbor, the fence, and maybe even the world. There are people who don't understand its virtues. Like a gardener friend of mine who sneers and calls it kudzu.

The fruit starts with lovely yellow blossoms, and then, partially hidden by the foliage, the squashes sort of sneak up on you. I've read that cucuzz can grow two feet per day, and I'm ready to believe it. All of a sudden, these big green vegetables are in your face. Four years ago, Mr. Virag grew one that topped three feet and took it to the office to show his colleagues. "It's a cucuzz," my husband said. "I grew it myself." People seemed impressed — this is a country where really big matters. He even pushed me to run a photo of it in the paper.

This summer we kept the vines well in bounds, but suddenly the lime-green giants appeared and two of them dangled from the arbor and hit unwary visitors in the head as they entered the garden. A windy rainstorm destroyed one, but the other survived. My husband clearly didn't want to cut it down, but a few days ago it fell of its own volition.

He was all smiles as he brought it into the house, and for a fearful minute I thought he was going to beat his chest like Tarzan and hurt himself. Instead, he measured the almost straight squash. It topped four feet. And this time, he didn't just want a photo of the cucuzz alone. "Take my picture with it," he said. Outside, he tried a variety of poses, some of which I don't see fit to mention.

In the one I like best, he held the cucuzz as if it were a baseball bat. This was very revealing. Mr. Virag's affection for cucuzz stems, in part, from its Italian heritage. He connects it with Joe DiMaggio, who was one of his boyhood heroes — the others were Joe Louis and Abraham Lincoln. Many of the cucuzzes we've grown curve and wind up looking like musical instruments (ergo the name Tromboncino).



PHOTOS BY IRENE VIRAG

Harvey Aronson, aka "Mr. Virag," goes to bat for cucuzz, an unusual squash he's proud to grow.

Others are nearly straight and look like baseball bats. He seems to favor the latter. Even after I took the photos, he kept swinging the cucuzz.

I could have thrown him a Big Boy tomato to hit and beamed him in the process, but instead I smiled. And the truth is that I, too, have grown into a cucuzz

fan. We planted the first ones as a spur-of-the-moment replacement for some climbing roses that petered out on the arbor. We kept on planting them, and soon I realized that I couldn't live without them. We harvest some when they're small and at their most flavorful, but I enjoy the way they look when they've

got some stature and shine in the sunlight. Besides, even when the fruit is giant-size, I combine chunks of the pure white flesh with chicken in a tasty stew.

You can steam, broil, stuff, stew and grill cucuzz. What's good to know is that it contains vitamins A and C and but no fat or cholesterol. A half-cup serving accounts for only 20 calories. And, as my friend Giro DiLillo of Prianti Farms in Dix Hills, where I find my cucuzz seedlings, once told me, "My grandfather used to fry the blossoms. He'd say to my grandmother, 'Mama, can you fry these up for me?'"

My experience has been the squash of

squashes resists insects and disease. I plant them in well-prepared and enriched beds, and the cucuzz does the rest.

Oh yes, cucuzz makes a wonderful conversation piece inside the garden as well as outside. We kept a baseball-bat beauty in our potting room for months before it started to, let's say, deteriorate. It complemented the wallpaper.

My proud husband told visitors the same thing he told them this season when they ran into the dangling giants. "It's called cucuzz. I grew it myself."

Or as Louis Prima so eloquently put it:

*"My Cucuzza  
Cucuzza bella  
She's my pizza pie with lotsa  
mozzarella. . . .  
I dream of my Cucuzza  
She's the only dish for me."*

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Irene, Irene, quite serene, how does your cucuzz grow? Vine and dandy, thanks.

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