Ginseng, the Divine Root: The Curious History of the Plant That Captivated the World by David A. Taylor

Enjoyable Read

The story behind ginseng is as remarkable as the root itself. Prized for its legendary curative powers, ginseng launched the rise to power of China's last great dynasty; inspired battles between France and England; and sparked a boom in Minnesota comparable to the California Gold Rush. It has made and broken the fortunes of many and has inspired a subculture in rural America unrivaled by any herb in the plant kingdom.

Today ginseng is at the very center of alternative medicine, believed to improve stamina, relieve stress, stimulate the immune system, enhance mental clarity, and restore well-being. It is now being studied by medical researchers for the treatment of cancer, diabetes, and Parkinsons disease.

In Ginseng, the Divine Root, David Taylor tracks the path of this fascinating plant—from the forests east of the Mississippi to the bustling streets of Hong Kong and the remote corners of China. He becomes immersed in a world full of wheelers, dealers, diggers, and stealers, all with a common goal: to hunt down the elusive Root of Life. Weaving together his intriguing adventures with ginsengs rich history, Taylor uncovers a story of international crime, ancient tradition, botany, herbal medicine, and the vagaries of human nature.

My Personal Review:
Let's see, what do I know about ginseng? It's a supposed herbal panacea, from China (or was that Korea?). It began invading New Age
consciousness and health food stores around the time of Woodstock. It has quite a nasty, bitter taste. Oh, and didn't some clever American farmers recently start growing ginseng and selling it back to the Chinese? Clearly what I knew was not a lot, and after reading Ginseng, the Divine Root, I realized half of that was completely wrong. Two facts underpin David A. Taylor's fascinating book: ginseng has been growing in North America for 70 million years; and North Americans have been selling ginseng to the Chinese for almost 300 years.

Treasured by Chinese as a tonic for thousands of years, ginseng had been pushed towards extinction in China when half way around the globe a Jesuit missionary made a fortuitous discovery. In Quebec Joseph-François Lafitau was ministering to Mohawk converts, but in that great theology/science duality so characteristic of his order, he was also intently studying the Iroquois. While there he happened on an article by a fellow French missionary who had travelled extensively in China. Lafitau was intrigued. The article described ginseng, its use and value in Chinese medicine. He then, rather remarkably, set out to see if he could find the plant locally. In 1716 after only three months of searching, Lafitau with the help of the Mohawk, had identified Panax quinquefolium, American ginseng, virtually identical to Asian ginseng. The root had long been used medicinally by the Mohawk and other Native Americans but never with the same passion as the Chinese.

So began a rush for 'forest gold' as thousands in Canada combed the woodlands for wild roots, all destined for a lucrative market on the far edges of the Pacific Ocean. As ginseng fever spread, even Daniel Boone was later involved in the trade down in West Virginia. Ginseng, writes the author, became the United States' first major export to China.

Taylor weaves together the many threads of the ginseng story, a tale that straddles two continents with vastly contrasting cultures. This is reflected, in the differing ways ginseng is valued and used in each. "In Chinese medicine," writes the author, "it's an all-purpose tonic, often blended with more toxic herbs to mellow their effects. In Western medicine it's gaining converts for relieving severe fatigue."

The book reads like an adventure as Taylor follows the American ginseng trail throughout one season, meeting farmers, traders, and various experts, even joining a ranger on a night stakeout in a national park trying to nab poachers of wild ginseng. The story is perhaps most interesting when Taylor joins diggers in the 'hunt' for the root in Appalachia. Wild ginseng is such an idiosyncratic plant that the search for it is considered more akin to hunting - it can, for instance remain dormant underground for several years, waiting for the right conditions before sending up a new shoot. Some diggers claim the plant can camouflage itself or even move! What is more certain is that its relative scarcity these days only adds to the challenge of finding it, and no doubt, to its market value.
It was not until the Seventies, more than 250 years after Lafitau identified the plant that ginseng started to become widely known in the United States. Now Americans spend more than $100 million annually on products listing it as an ingredient.

There are three types of ginseng (in descending order of value): wild, wild simulated, and cultivated. Such is the value of ginseng that 'ginsengers' protect their plants like gold prospectors defend a claim. Even cultivated ginseng, the most common form, is difficult to work with and requires six to eight years to reach the size desired by Asian markets. Wisconsin-grown ginseng is now considered the world's best, and fetches a correspondingly high price. Wisconsin is also the leading exporter.

As quickly as the newer markets for ginseng are growing, China will likely remain the primary market, and not just because of China's huge population and expanding economy. In the West, for every ginseng buff there is a cynic, and five others who couldn't care less. In China by contrast, so strong is the underlying traditional belief in the restorative powers of ginseng, that just about everyone is at least an occasional user.

The book is aimed at the general reader, but industry types might also learn a thing or two given the secretive nature of the business Taylor describes. Readers who are not utter ginseng devotees might find the middle section of Ginseng a little slow, but most of us will be swept through anyway by Taylor's enthusiasm. One chapter though, Served by the Finest Chefs, focusing on ginseng and food, somewhat misses its mark because the central figure, celebrity chef Ming Tsai unlike the other major characters in the book, is not strongly connected to ginseng, at least professionally. He does not cook with the root in his own restaurant, and is surprisingly, unaware of American ginseng.

Taylor winds up this highly engrossing trawl through the history and business of ginseng in Hong Kong and China, meeting with ginseng merchants and visiting specialist markets. We learn, somewhat fittingly for the times, that in China both Asian and American ginseng is now cultivated using modern American methods. That is good news for consumers, but the lasting allure of 'forest gold' has placed the wild root under threat in America, as well as China.