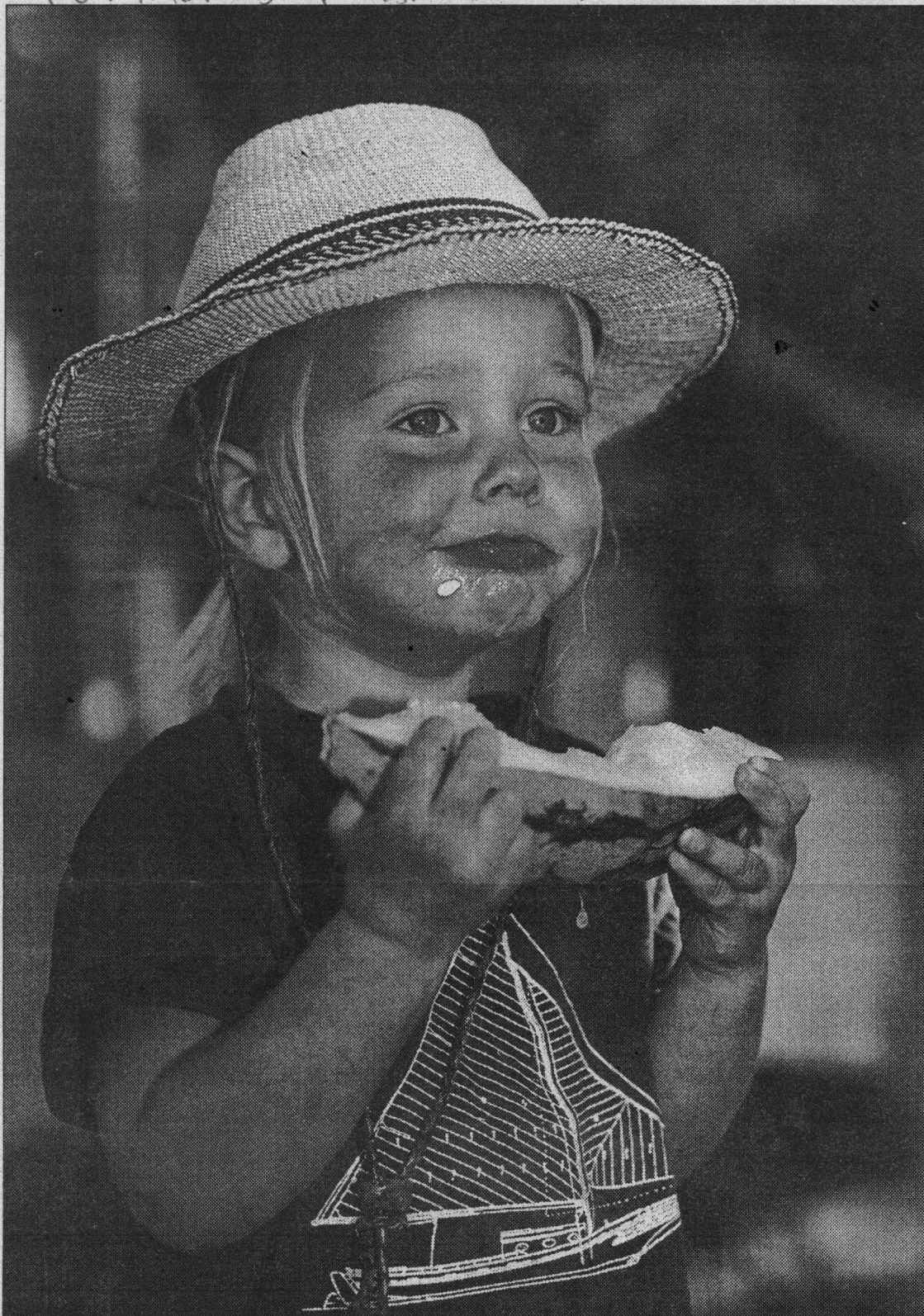


It's All at the Farmer's Market

Farmer's Market



Simon Marino slurps down some delicious yellow watermelon at the Santa Cruz Farmer's Market.

Catch up on the latest gossip while celebrating the harvest

by Kimberly Guardino

“HEY LADY, LADY, TRY the peach,” a man with a cap is shouting at me, holding out a paper plate that's bending precariously under a puddle of nectar. Piled high is a clutter of golden, glistening, organic peach slices.

I daintily reach toward the handsome stranger's plate and partake of his juicy offering. “Mmmmm, oh my, ooooooh, this is good,” I say knitting my brow and asking for another. The man smiles, and I decide to try two more of his nonpareil slices of fruit. Before you know it, I'm buying a bag of these succulent ambrosial beauties, which I had no intention of doing when I passed by his stand 30 minutes ago on my first round of the downtown Santa Cruz Farmer's Market.

A few steps away, I am accosted by another grower with metal tongs that tout a bright pink chunk of watermelon. Inches from my face (this could get indelicate I realize, as I contemplate taking it with my mouth since my hands are tangled up with a basket and bags), I momentarily hesitate. A quick learner from birth thankfully — and from my peach experience a few moments ago — I drop my basket and snatch this vibrant lovely right out of the gentleman's extended metal paw, before it dares to find solace in someone else's quavering mouth.

Mmmmm. And suddenly a watermelon finds it's way into my swelled knit produce bag.

As I try to maneuver through the thick crowd of market-goers laden with oversized baskets, teeming with sweet-smelling produce and brightly colored flowers, I run into an old friend I haven't seen since college. After a leisurely chat, I make my way towards the spot where everyone else is heading

in a frenzy — the baskets of berries that are selling for a dollar apiece.

Visions of homemade preserves are dancing in my head when I bump bellies with a woman who is also nearing the seventh month of her first pregnancy. We compare notes, navels and fetal movement for a good 10 minutes (all the while, I am torn between this sisterly chat and those berries that seem to be flying off the table into everyone's basket but mine). Finally, as I make my way to within inches of the shady berry table, I run smack into a journalist friend. The berries, by the time I get there, are all picked over. I am left with one itty-bitty basket, just enough to sprinkle on my pancakes in the morning.

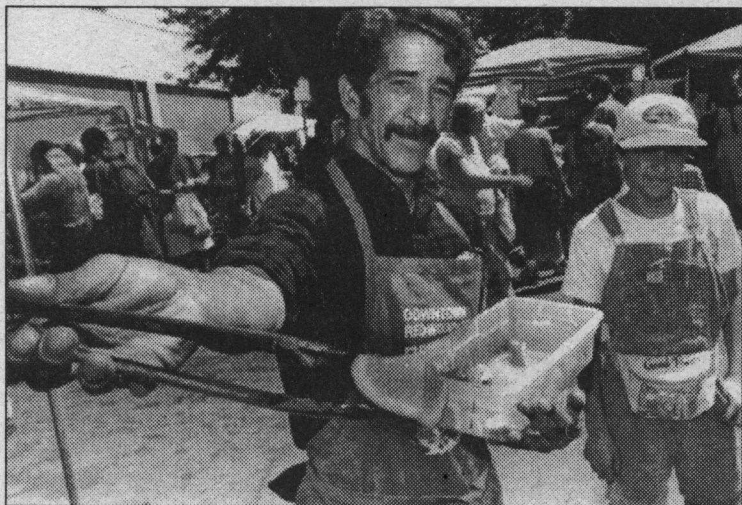
I am now certain that what they say about the farmer's markets is true. People come not only to graze on produce picked at its farm-fresh best, but to fulfill a universal community need — that of socializing. And what better place to do it? The sun is shining, people are smiling, sticky-faced children are running around buying watermelons with their well-spent quarters (and tell me, where else are these little ones going to take a bite of an uncooked, unwashed green bean?).

There's no doubt about it, each of the farmer's markets in our sun (and fog) rippled county has a distinct personality which is reflected solely by the cultural groups who descend upon them every week. While the growers and vendors may look very familiar, indeed many sell their produce and wares at each of our county's four certified farmer's markets, they are simply friendly, talkative, attractive fixtures for market dwellers to swarm around. (But talk to any one of them and you will find intriguing lives standing just behind that table of Beverly Hills apples, which by the way are pink when you bite into them.) Which brings me to my next point.

Farmer's markets are not only great social gatherings, but they are a fabulous resource for armchair anthropologists to make a bevy of discoveries, all the while getting their shopping done.

The Aptos Farmer's Market at Cabrillo College, spread out every Saturday morning over several rows of sun-drenched pavement, boasts a slew of early-to-rise women who pile out of their cars at 7 a.m. and head straight for the flower vendors. These ladies don't stay to chat, otherwise their flowers might wilt. This behavior is quite unlike the flower buyers at the downtown market, who carry their bundles of sunlight around all afternoon, like prizes won at a county fair.

And I hear tell of Aptos market-goers stopping off for their morning lattes and Danish on their way to market, lest they get hungry during their Saturday morning social ritual that, for many, has probably replaced going to church. Word is this is the market where you can spot university professors, museum heads and other prominent citizens. As one professor moaned to a friend of mine, “Oh, everybody comes here. It's not like the winter, when it's just, us. . .”



Joaquin Cordero offers juicy oranges from Tri-Weber Farms of Orosl, California.



Kannika Davis rolls through the market with her 3-year-old daughter, Maureen.

At the downtown market Wednesday afternoons, it seems as if all the local artists and free spirits pour out of their Victorian apartments in droves. You can see them blocks away pulling their wagons and carrying oversized baskets on their colorful march to market. As you wind through the shady lot that's home one day a week to country flowers, melons, beeswax candles, fresh-caught fish and heirloom tomatoes, you will soon realize that this is the market where the beautiful people shop.

The Felton market, nestled in the front lot of a church on Highway 9 every Tuesday, is a somewhat diluted version of the downtown market. It's a much smaller event but still colorful and home to Santa Cruz Mountain soap-makers and beekeepers who sell their wares with a warm, bucolic charm.

A handful of retired folks and mothers with babes scatter across the unshaded, and, at times, blistering hot dirt lot that serves as the Scotts Valley market, also Tuesdays. This is without a doubt the mellowest of all the markets, and the only one not serenaded by live music. But it does boast a few Scotts Valley growers who come out for this market alone and are worth visiting. Some of the best peaches and nectarines are to be found here.

Like the village marketplace or town square of yesteryear, these markets all serve the same purpose, that of giving the community a sunny, cheerful place to gather and celebrate the bountiful earth—or just to chat someone up about a weekend rendezvous or the latest gossip. Whatever the reason, my best advice to you is *run*, don't walk (and don't forget your basket), to your nearest farmer's market and see for yourself what all the glorious, sunny fuss is truly about.

Local Certified Farmer's Markets

☞ **Downtown Farmer's Market** happens every Wednesday afternoon, 2:30—7 p.m., and is located in the downtown parking lot on Cedar Street (behind the Logos building) between Cathcart and Lincoln Streets. Runs seasonally.

☞ **Aptos Farmer's Market** (and "MarketPlace") is every Saturday morning (and Sundays beginning in the fall), from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. in parking lot K at Cabrillo College. Runs year round.

☞ **Felton Farmer's Market** happens every Tuesday from 2:30 to 7 p.m. and is located at the Felton Presbyterian Church at 6090 Highway 9. Runs mid-May to Halloween.

☞ **Scotts Valley Farmer's Market** is every Tuesday from 3 to 7 p.m. and is held at the empty lot on Erba Lane off of Scotts Valley Drive. Runs seasonally.

☞ **UCSC Market Cart** (for produce and flowers grown organically on the UCSC campus) is located at the base of campus on High and Bay streets, Tuesdays and Fridays from noon to 6 p.m. Runs through early fall.