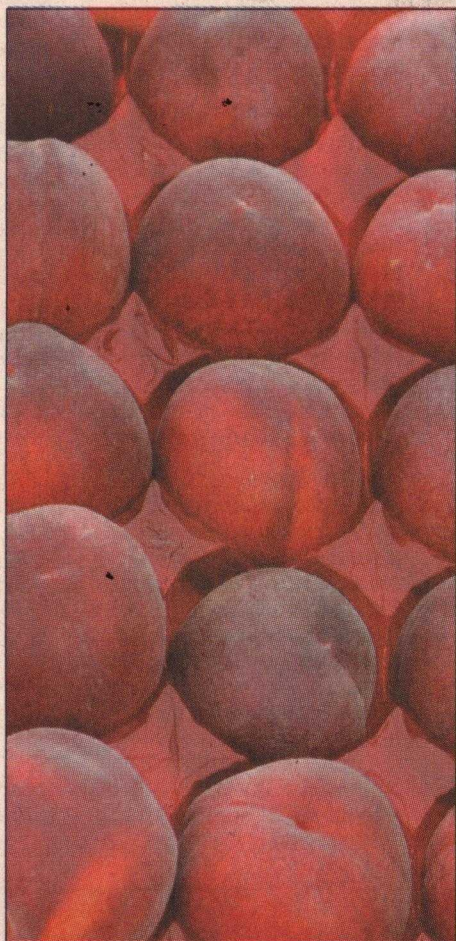


Farmers markets in Santa Cruz County display the blaze of color and freshness of locally grown produce.

Photos by Larry Selman/Special to the Sentinel



Let's face it. We are not only blessed by our Mediterranean climate and the bounty of our local family-run farms. We are downright spoiled. Spoiled rotten.



Stone fruit is so ripe right now, the juice is ready to explode into your mouth.

Off to market we go



Growers will tell you about how the produce was grown and harvested.

Area farmers markets reach their summer peak

By MARTI SELMAN

SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

The sun has burned off the last wisps of fog, and the band is crooning "Summertime ... and the livin' is easy." I have just bit into a luscious O. Henry peach, so juicy that its nectar has spilled down my sleeve and has sent me searching for napkins. It is one of those quintessential Santa Cruz days, and we are indulging in our favorite Saturday morning ritual: a trip to our neighborhood farmers market. Which, in our case, happens to be on the Westside, at Mission Street and Western Drive.

I glance around at the tempting array of summer's bounty around me — all cut up into bite-sized pieces for tasting. [These farmers are no dummies. They know that once you taste of their not-forbidden fruit, you will be hooked.] The wafting fragrance of sweet peas and fresh basil compete with the aroma of ripe nectarines glowing in the sunlight.

Already, I'm on sensory overload. Is there a protocol for fruit and vegetable tasting, as there is for wine? Start with the tart and move toward the sweet?

Before I can decide, my husband, Larry, nudges me, an aromatic hot cappuccino in hand. He will save a place for me, he says, at a cafe table under a wide umbrella, where we can enjoy our coffee and freshly baked pastries, as well as the fresh strawberries, raspberries and blueberries I am cramming into my bag. They are all hand-picked at utterly ripe perfection, carefully transported and artfully displayed by local organic farmers.

On my way to the umbrella, I notice that my husband has bumped into old friends. "Are you here to shop or to shmooze?" asks Cindy, who with her husband, David, have also run into old chums.

"Both, actually."

I wave to William and Sonia — friends who also religiously attend our Saturday morning ritual — now with their toddler in tow. Last summer Sonia spent the better part of two Saturdays walking around the market, hoping to coax baby Stella out into the world. And now, thanks to the market, 1-year-old Stella is madly in love with blueberries.

As I glance around the market, I notice quite a few seniors pulling shopping carts on wheels. There are young, multi-tasking professionals juggling recyclable cloth shopping bags with

cell phones. I watch young parents basking in the sun while their young-uns dance to the beat of the band. It's an event for all.

Admittedly, we Santa Cruzans sometimes exhibit an annoying air of superiority to the rest of the world. But in the farmers market

department, at least, our narcissism may be well-founded. Where else can you enjoy a full gourmet breakfast from Gabriella Cafe, a cappuccino from Shady Todd's Coffee [organic



Information on organic certification and where the produce comes from is posted in every booth.

If You Go

■ Santa Cruz Community Farmers Market hosts three markets:

DOWNTOWN SANTA CRUZ from 2:30-6:30 p.m. Wednesdays at Lincoln and Center streets.

WESTSIDE SANTA CRUZ from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturdays at Mission Street and Western Drive.

LIVE OAK from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sundays at East Cliff and 15th avenues, May through December.

Get more information at <http://www.santacruzfarmersmarket.org/>.

■ Monterey Bay Certified Farmers Market hosts one local market:

APTOS from 8 a.m.-noon Saturdays, Cabrillo College, Lots B, C, and D.

Get more information at <http://www.montereybayfarmers.org/home.html>.

■ Felton Farmers Market

FELTON from 2:30-6:30 p.m. Tuesdays at St. John's Church, May through November.

Get more information at feltonfarmersmarket.org.

■ Watsonville Certified Farmers Market

WATSONVILLE from 3-7 p.m. Fridays at Peck and Main streets.

Get more information at <http://www.localharvest.org/farmers-markets/M3192>.

Market

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coffee, fair-trade certified with organically produced milk, sugar and chocolate] while munching on strawberries picked at a ranch just five minutes north of town?

Let's face it. We are not only blessed by our Mediterranean climate and the bounty of our local family-run farms. We are downright spoiled. Spoiled rotten.

At our farmers markets, fresh, organic, beautiful and luscious summer fruits and vegetables are a matter of course. But if you are also in the market for fresh, wild fish, oysters, smoked fish, honey and beeswax products, mushrooms, dried fruits and nuts, Eden-like flowers, hand-made breads and pastries, artisan cheeses, homemade pasta, sauces and crepes, olives and salsas [the list goes on] you will find it at your neighborhood farmers market.

What about prices? You may expect to pay slightly more for prepared foods than you would at a local grocery, but everything is hand-made. Prices for fresh produce are comparable to local health food stores.

Oh, did I mention the ambience? Priceless.

Having visited my sister in Italy for the last two summers, where fussy shoppers don plastic gloves out of respect for the produce and each other, I have to say that nowhere is the concept "think global, buy local" better exemplified than here at our own farmers markets. Growers must post their organic certification in their booths, so you know exactly where your produce comes from. And they will tell you everything you want to know about how their product was grown, harvested and how their farming practices fit into the bigger scheme of things.

However, after you have had a taste, you may not even care about those details: You'll just be asking for more of a good thing.

At the moment, almost everyone is selling heirloom and/or dry-farmed tomatoes. They are fabulous just about any time, in just about any dish, but right now is the time to enjoy them. One morning I tried halving some and heating them gently in my skillet along with my eggs. I couldn't believe how much the gentle heating intensified their already-rich flavor. I'm hooked,



A shopper evaluates her choices and adds to her box of treasures.

Photos by Larry Selman/Special to the Sentinel



Mushrooms offered at area farmers markets are grown organically and offer a variety of subtle tastes.

and there is no going backward.

Each week, as I make my rounds, I learn more about the farms and their products. Far West Fungi grows its mushrooms in the cool microclimate of Moss Landing, in a growing medium that is organic, with no fungicides. While most customers prefer shitake [perhaps because they are simply more familiar], the delicate taste of lion's mane is subtle, almost like crabmeat. Oyster mushrooms are great in omelettes.

Couldn't I just buy a bunch of each and mix them all up in a sauce? Absolutely, I was told.

Kurt Christiansen and Toby Kline from Oso Velloso Farms in

Bonny Doon serve up a variety of Mediterranean fruits, vegetables and flowers, which change each week. So you have to stop by and see what they have brought. Typically they can be counted on for tall bunches of fresh basil, with roots still intact, which stay fresh in a bowl of water in my kitchen for a full week, filling the house with that heady reassurance that summer is still here. They are also selling lav-

ender, black-eyed susans, echinacea flowers, a salad mix with fresh flower petals mixed in, and giant sunflower heads to put out in your yard to attract the many bird species that love sunflower seeds. A European tradition, they told me.

OK! Gotta try one.

A recent addition to our market is a new grower specializing in organic wine and olive oils. Condor's Hope Ranch is actually located in Santa Barbara County, but the wine-making and oil-pressing are done locally by the Gliessman family. Founder Steve Gliessman is the chair of the UCSC agroecology program, and is a guru of sustainable farming, so I expect to hear more from this family-run farm. There is a farmers market in your neighborhood, too. If you are looking for flavors to tingle your taste buds, ingredients for a memorable meal, or the venue for a perfect family outing, load up the car with anyone you can coax out of the house. But beware. This behavior may become habit-forming.

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