
SEASONAL EATING:

WHAT TO EAT...AND MAYBE MORE IMPORTANTLY, WHAT NOT TO EAT

BY STEVE FIELDS



We who live in Ventura County are extremely fortunate to have fresh fruits and vegetables available all year long. I love to tease farmers or backyard gardeners I meet from elsewhere in the country with tales of my winter/spring harvest. The looks of envy when I start to rattle off what I have growing in my garden in February, March and April are transparently clear with marvel and awe.

We are also blessed with year-round farmers' markets filled with wonderful delights. I am always amazed to read about seasonal markets in the East and Midwest that operate from June to October. I pity the poor folks who don't have the abundance of freshness we take for granted.

But before I list all of the great wonders you should be enjoying on your winter and early spring dinner tables, I would like to spend some time talking about what you *shouldn't* find there. There is no excuse here to eat what is not in the peak of its season.

I would like to also put out a challenge to local restaurants: Don't just maintain your menu because that is what you think your customers want. You have an obligation to serve the best food and lead the way. And isn't it better to serve something that is at its height of ripeness and flavor rather than something that has likely been shipped thousands

of miles, stored in refrigeration for months or grown in a hothouse requiring huge amounts of fossil fuel?

My biggest complaint is seeing tomatoes (like in a Caprese Salad—tomato, basil and Mozzarella) on menus throughout the winter. There is no way the tomato could be worth eating. And the hothouse basil of winter is a mere shadow of its summer equivalent. Tomatoes, along with their relatives eggplants and bell peppers, should be eaten from June or July through October when the best basil comes from the garden as well. June to October. That is it. For their best taste, all of these vegetables should be picked when fully ripe and consumed as soon as possible.

Some of my other out-of-season issues include year-round strawberries, blackberries and stone fruit. These fruits all have specific seasons that somehow we have lost in recent years. Growers keep trying to extend seasons earlier and later, but the resulting product really isn't worth it. Try it yourself this year. Taste one of the early season peaches that appear in late spring. Then taste a peach in the middle of the summer. I promise you that you won't bother with an early season peach ever again.

The bottom line is that we don't have to have everything available all year long. American consumers often cook backwards. They decide what they want to eat and then go shopping with a list of what to buy. Most traditional food cultures—especially in places like France, Spain and Italy, which have a climate similar to ours—operate the other way around. People go to the market, see what looks like the best that week, and then decide what to cook with that.

And speaking of what you should be looking for this time of year, here are some truly wonderful options to consider:

Greens—There are so many different types of greens available and they are among the healthiest things you can eat. They range from relatively sweet (chard and spinach) to somewhat bitter (dandelion, rapini, turnip and mustard greens) to stronger flavors and textures (collard greens).

Cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower—This is generally the prime time for these vegetables because they don't like the heat of our summer but can handle our cold nights. In fact, the cold weather can add to their sweetness. If you have thought you don't like one of these vegetables, this is the time of year to try it again.

Winter squash—Most winter squash will get sweeter as they rest in a cool, dark environment. And there is almost nothing better than a rich, dense Butternut or Kobacha squash soup on a cold winter's night.

Citrus—Of course, this is the heart of the citrus season. But this year, branch out and try blood oranges, Meyer lemons or all of the locally grown tangerine varieties. You will be amazed at the variations in taste, the yin-yang of sweetness and tartness that is the wonder of citrus.

Strawberries—I am including strawberries because by late March as the temperature warms up, the strawberries start to become little gems of delight. But please, wait until the

weather warms. Otherwise, you are likely to get strawberries that are just slightly more tasty than Styrofoam (no offense to local growers, but I think they would agree with me on this one).

And as winter turns into spring, there are some exciting things to look forward to at the farmers' markets, including the arrival of English shelling peas, giant fava bean pods, asparagus and artichokes.

One of the great lessons I have found from having my own year-round garden is that no matter what the season is I always have something wonderful to enjoy that is at its peak. And I always have something else that will be ready for harvest when I am finished eating what I am enjoying now. There is anticipation, enjoyment, satiation and then the cycle begins with something new. Even if you are not a gardener yourself, you can easily follow this pattern by taking advantage of our wonderful farmers' markets.

Try eating only what is at its height of ripeness this year. I guarantee you that you will have your tastiest year ever.

CERTIFIED FARMERS' MARKETS IN VENTURA AND SANTA BARBARA COUNTIES



VENTURA COUNTY

Wednesday:

Midtown Ventura

9 a.m.–1 p.m.
Pacific View Mall
West Parking Lot, north of Sears,
near Dunning Street

Thursday:

Thousand Oaks

Temporary Location
through SPRING 2008
2–6:30 p.m.
403 W. Hillcrest Drive
Roof top of Recreation District
(formerly City Hall building)

Saturday:

Downtown Ventura

8:30 a.m.–noon
Corner of Palm &
Santa Clarita Streets

Sunday:

Santa Clarita

8:30 a.m.–noon
College of the Canyons,
Parking Lot 8

Ojai

9 a.m.–1 p.m.
300 E. Matilija St.
Behind the Arcade,
between N. Signal & N.
Montgomery

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

Saturday:

Downtown Santa Barbara

8:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m. year-round
Corner of Santa Barbara & Cota
Streets

Sunday:

Goleta

Camino Real Marketplace
10 a.m.–2 p.m. year-round
Corner of Storke & Hollister

Tuesday:

Old Town Santa Barbara

4–7:30 p.m. summer
3–6:30 p.m. winter
500 & 600 blocks of State Street

Wednesday:

La Cumbre Plaza

Inside the La Cumbre Plaza Shopping
Center
2–6 p.m. summer
1–5 p.m. winter

Solvang Village

Copenhagen Drive & First Street
2:30–6:30 p.m. summer
2:30–6 p.m. winter

Thursday:

Goleta—Calle Real Center

5700 block of Calle Real
3–6 p.m. year-round

Carpinteria

800 block of Linden Avenue
4–7 p.m. summer
3–6 p.m. winter

Friday:

Montecito—Coast Village Road

1100 & 1200 block of Coast Village
Road
8–11:15 a.m. year-round