

FRESH NEWS

ANOTHER SERVICE FROM THE MERCHANTS OF SAN FRANCISCO WHOLESALE PRODUCE MARKET

SAN FRANCISCO

MARCH 8, 2010

CHILEAN EARTHQUAKE

This time of year we are usually talking Chilean fresh produce, not a disaster that recently shook our southern hemisphere source of summer fruit. As is always the case, the most tragic toll is human life, for which there is no replacement. The aftermath in terms of produce is that workers, quite naturally have family tragedies to contend with. Also, the infrastructure is damaged. Roads and bridges are knocked out which complicates getting produce from the fields, to the points of transfer. The airports are open, but not running at full speed. Whatever is in our marketplace now was either here already or was in transit. Stiff prices on Chilean grapes, for example, were inching up even before the earthquake. Some major upticks in prices may be related to a natural reaction to and uncertain supply. It will take a while to find the natural "normal" although higher prices for Chilean produce. Uncertainty brings higher prices.

WEATHER WORDS

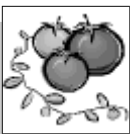
How about cold and kind of wet, with a decent day thrown in here and there! Bad weather has taken its toll on many vegetable items, most noticeably in the salad green areas. Lettuces, along with loose spinach and gourmet greens have all suffered with the wet stuff.

VEGETABLES

ARTICHOKES

The for-real spring season is almost upon us. "Winter kissed" artichokes have mostly worked their way through the pipeline leaving us with a healthy looking supply leading into the spring. This could change, but with spring approaching, it looks better with every passing day.

TOMATOES



The low supplies and high prices will be the norm for a while. Bad weather in Mexico, coupled with yes, the ill effects of the Florida freeze are making for a tight tomato market top to bottom. Our best hope is improved weather in Mexico as right now they are only produce about enough to feed themselves. Not much left to export.

CAULIFLOWER

Fitful pricing, up-up and then not. Mostly coastal Santa Maria supply but desert is available for extra \$.

CABBAGE



With St. Patty's Day on the horizon, the usual price roller coaster is appearing. Prices bump early, some retailers literally give it away as a holiday promotion, and the true market price is not established until March 16th. Go figure. To coin a baseball phrase, cabbage goes way back, way back ... waaaaaay back! How about 4,000 years back, to be imprecise. It is believed that cabbage evolved from a type of sea kale that grew wild on the northern European coast. At that time, it was loose leaved with an open growing pattern, more like our present day loose leaf lettuce. But even by the Roman times, the common heading variety was on the produce scene. Cabbages have always been an important staple food because they can be grown in a variety of climates during different times of the year. Even today, cabbage production is spread out all over these here United States, from the tropical shores of Florida to the anything BUT tropical Alaska. Cabbage is a good source of vitamin C, if it is not boiled to unconsciousness. It offers a fair amount of vitamin B1 and other minerals. Over boiling leeches vitamin C out of the cabbage and into the water. Steaming is actually better. Savoy cabbage in particular contains almost 20% of the RDA of beta carotene, whereas green and red have little. It's light on calories, only about 20 per shredded cupful. Cabbage and its related kin such as kale, cauliflower, broccoli are known to contain compounds which are thought to prevent certain types of cancer. So this is the time to sing the praises of this nutritious, versatile vegetable.

ASPARAGUS

Probably the best news around the veggie bins is that the local delta area asparagus supply has started. The offerings, for the most part are very nice with good color and healthy looking spears. Even some tips available. Should be plenty of supply for this year's Easter, a fairly early one on April 4th.

PEAS

Snaps and snows are of primarily Mexican origin, with some Guatemalan, with OK quality. Prices are stiff with snows being a bit more reasonable. As spring approaches this is a category to watch. As the rains and cold let up, major supply comes from the central California coast. English peas from Mexico are a mixed bag. Some are A#1 quality and flavor and some are not. Let your taste buds be your guide.

CUCUMBERS

They are steady in price with more Mexican supply waiting in the wings. There are Mexican hothouse cukes around. In general, the Mexican hothouse cucumber doesn't usually meet the standard of California grown. The Mexican are cheaper but the California usually get you better holding quality.

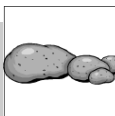
SQUASH

Zucchini is doing fine, although quality can be an issue. On the yellow squash side, there is far more straightneck than there is crookneck. Mexico is looking to transition into fresher, more northern fields, so we should be seeing better supplies in the next couple of weeks.

BEANS

Here's how you can describe beans, how about no good and worse. Again, Florida is very short beans so they take "our" supply. Past poor weather has limited Mexico's supply. As is usually the case, good beans can be had with some effort. But if you find GOOD beans, bite the bullet and sign the tag.

POTATOES



Slimmer supplies everywhere for a variety of reasons. If there was any real demand prices would be considerably higher. This time of year we see Florida reds, an eye-catching, almost crimson color. The Florida supply will be less this year, but still worth going after.



ONIONS

Cross your fingers, especially for white onions. Storage supplies are dwindling and new fields from Texas/Mexico are hampered by poor weather. Smaller crop and later to boot. On the milder side of the flavor scale are some Peruvian sweets. Pretty soon we should see the start of domestic sweet onions with the Mexican/Texas 1015 and the rest to follow.

SPINACH

Inconsistent quality, sometimes good, and then sometimes..... Loose spinach is even tougher to get in any kind of decent shape.

Written by Mark Ferro

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BROCCOLI

Prices are stronger all around.

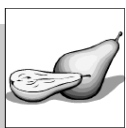
ICEBERG

Strong market. All desert supply with Huron and then, yes, Salinas in the future.

LEAF

Again, more not-so-good news. Prices are up and shelf life is unstable. Check your lots carefully.

ORGANIC



The first organic asparagus is around, but limited. Organic d'anjou pears are holding up very well in terms of affordable prices and eating quality. Organic southern hemisphere bartletts are very popular, usually from Argentina. Very nice fruit. The first spring onions and green garlic have arrived. These spring time specialties gather more positive press and food followers every season.

FRUITS

GRAPES

Usually this is a great time for Chilean grapes. Not so after the earthquake. What is in the pipeline will get scarcer as time goes by.

LEMONS/LIMES

A decent lemon supply. Limes have been higher for a longer spell than usual. That said, the lime picture can changed dramatically and quickly.

MANGOES

The current crop out of Peru, the Kent variety, is beginning to wind down. The Mexican season has begun with the Ataulfo variety, but in pretty small sizes. Eating quality has been good even considering the usual first of the season greenness. Look for our main season Mexican mangos, the Haden and Tommy Atkins to start within a couple of weeks.

WHAT'S in a NAME?

Apparently lots. At least according to the California Prune Board which has successfully petitioned the FDA to allow the industry to change the name to "dried plums". Seems as if studies have shown that the term "prunes" carries some negative baggage. What the heck, it worked for Chinese gooseberries (kiwi).

BERRIES

Strawberries are a very mixed bag. Good ones are available but pricey. Lots of strawberries in the middle of the pack as to amount of white shoulders and rain related issues. The rest of the berry scene is waning in supply and increasing in price. Raspberries are just plain high. Who knows about any Chilean blues? It depends on how much can make it through the transportation system. Blackberries out of Mexico are decent, but they won't carry the whole category.

NAVELS

Now is the time folks. Flavor, size and price are right. Even the top tier labels will not break your budget.

VARIETAL CITRUS



This field is starting to shrink. The Honey Tangerine is still sweet and seedy, prices range according to size. The 120's make an excellent juicing candidate.

Minneolas will hang in there as well. The blood oranges are probably the darling in this category as their color is BRILLIANT and flavor is A #1.

SPECIALTY

Run, do not walk to the nearest case of Mexican Sweet Limes. More of the color of a lemon, their flavor is that of a tropical orange. Quite common in the Latin trade, limas deserve bigger play. Way bigger play!

ABOUT THE WRITER

Mark Ferro is an active produce professional who not only writes a weekly newspaper column, but also co-hosts an hour-long radio show about fresh fruits and vegetables. As part of the "Produce Pair" he can be heard Saturdays at noon (PST) on the Talk America Radio Network on over 60 stations coast to coast., including Yada Yada Radio 1550AM here in the Bay Area or listen on the Internet at www.producepair.com.

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WHAT A TOMATO

YUET CHEONG PRODUCE