

FRESH NEWS

ANOTHER SERVICE FROM THE MERCHANTS OF SAN FRANCISCO WHOLESALE PRODUCE MARKET

SAN FRANCISCO

SEPTEMBER 22, 2008

FRUIT NOT JUST YOUR GRANDDADDY'S APPLE



As the apple season goes, the Gravenstein comes to us early, like late summer. It is a fairly small apple, and a bit lop sided in shape. Primarily green/yellow in color, it will be streaked in red some. There is a variety called the Red Gravenstein which, as you can guess, shows more red blush to the skin. When fresh picked, like now, the bite is firm with a fruity tanginess to it. The Gravenstein is thought to have been grown first in Germany at the Castle Graefenstein back in the 1500's. According to the California Apple Commission, the Gravenstein came to California in the early 1800's. By the mid 1800's this apple was well established in Sonoma County. Back then, before refrigeration, the only way to store late summer or fall picked apples was to put them in a cold cellar. That limited the number of varieties and also the amount of apples you could store. After refrigeration became common, the field of take got wider. But still, even in regular refrigeration, apples won't last until the next harvest. In comes controlled atmosphere storage. By controlling the temperature and gas level, you could store many varieties from the fall all the way into the following summer. How does the Gravenstein fit into this? Well, by being the first apple on the market, it got lots of attention. Which was good for this apple in that, compared to other varieties, it does not store well. Even now, the Grav goes soft pretty easily. But today we have apples year round. Both from the northern and southern hemisphere. With so many apples to choose from, the Gravenstein has slowly fallen out of favor. Want more reasons? Another is that it is a far better cooking apple than a fresh eating one. It will make the best apple sauce ever. But hey, who really cooks apples anymore. Aisle 5 is packed with all kinds of apple sauce. And apple pies? Does it feel like Thanksgiving out your front door? People's tastes have also changed. Now it is "pass the sugar, honey". Hence the popularity of the sweet Fuji, Gala and now Honeycrisp varieties of apples. But here is the clincher. In Sonoma County it is FAR more profitable to grow wine grapes rather than apples. In the year 2000, all apples grown in Sonoma County took in about \$2.6 million. Wine grapes? Almost \$400 million! About 25 years ago there were about 10,000 acres of apples. Today there are about 2,000 acres actively producing, and probably less.

Couple all of that with the fact that China is flooding the world market with cheap apple juice concentrate, which is what Gravs are very good at, and you have a bleak Gravenstein scenario. At least they're not paving orchards with asphalt and concrete.

APPLES

California gets a small exclusive sales window before Washington State fruit really starts rolling. Lots to choose from. Display lots = sell lots!

MELONS

Some paring down as to varieties, but as the days get shorter and the evenings get cooler we'll be getting less and less. Honeydews and cantaloupes are still very reasonable in price with good eating quality. Cantaloupes have lost some of that mid-summer golden background color, but again the fruit is fine. Watermelons are still arriving in bins and will, as long as it stays warm. Eating quality is quite good, although sizing is smaller than it was a while back. After California we'll see some Arizona and then on to Mexico.

BERRIES



Starting to feel the seasonal availability pressure, but still enough to go around. Blueberries have shrunk down from pints back to half-pints and even 4.4 oz, and strawberry price and quality is a tad volatile. Strawberry price and quality will stabilize some when Oxnard re gears for fall and early winter production. Even raspberries, the most plentiful of the berry patch during fall are on the high side.

STONE FRUIT

Plums, as always, hold the course longer, with late varieties like the Angelino and Fortune. Look to add the usual Idaho fruit, this time a dark simka variety. Nectarines offer up fine late varieties but peaches will experience that end of summer dwindling supply scenario. There is a supply of Northwest fruit from Washington and even Idaho that stretches the season. And then there is always the hoped for Last Chance peach out of the California desert. Sometimes it is around, sometimes not.

MANGOES

The beefy Keitt variety will close out the spring/summer season. And in a BIG way, like in four count kind of big. South American fruit is poised to start and will be with us from one country or another from now until March. First country in the lineup will be Brazil.

FRENCH PRUNES

These represent the European counterparts to the very abundant Japanese varieties like Friar, Fortune, Laroda and others. (The Japanese varieties actually originated in China) Due to their use in processing, California prune acreage is twice that of regular plums. Prunes run smaller, have a drier texture, but have a richer sweetness than the rest of the clan. Definitely for the sampling tray.

PEARS

We're used to seeing the Bartlett, but also the Bosc, Comice, French Butter and even the diminutive Seckel pear are around. This market is still in the toddler stage though. For more info, try the California Pear Advisory Board at www.calpear.com

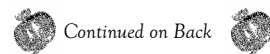
ORGANICALLY GROWN

Don't forget that it is still Organic Harvest Month. This may be an opportunity to shine a sales light on an expanding segment of the marketplace. Organic figs from the northern San Joaquin are still with us and will extend the season well past the early annual knock off of the conventional fig harvests from the Fresno/Madera area. There are still some organic melons around although not in the numbers of a while back. Need an organic color break? Fully red colored Starkrimson pears are available. The bell peppers have earned their colors ... red, orange, yellow and sometimes even purple! The ever popular organic broccoli has dipped to a comfortable level. Still a full line of specialty tomatoes, especially cherry toms, are with us. Grilled leeks-you bet! And beautiful too!! This may be an opportunity to shine a sales light on an expanding segment of the marketplace. For information on point of purchase materials and related material contact the Organic Trade Association www.ota.com.

SPECIALTY

Late summer and early fall is a great time for specialty chile and other peppers. Red Fresno, pimento, gypsy among others, show up this time of year. Also take advantage of the more plentiful supply of peppers like jalapenos and pasilla. When you see the thirty pounders as opposed to all ten pounders, you know there are plenty around. Local cranberry beans are shelled and sautéed by the in-the-know cooking crowd. Shallots, the gourmet onion (OK, so it is not really an onion) are new crop and full of cooking flavor.

Written by Mark Ferro

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VEGETABLES

BELL PEPPERS

Both choice and large green bells continue to be very reasonable in price, and locally grown. Red bells continue to perform well in the price category as the Indian summer heat brings on the colors, including yellows.

CABBAGE

Plenty of both colors to be had. Use the brash color of red cabbage wedges to break with heads of iceberg lettuce. Encourage the use as a late summer salad additive.

BROCCOLI/FLOWER

Less broccoli around than cauliflower, but still plenty of both. Quality has been consistently good.

CORN

Get your last local licks in as Brentwood and Mendota will soon finish up. (Although our Indian summer heat can make that prediction premature.)

TOMATOES

Take your pick. Out of the hothouses both clusters and one layers are at affordable prices and very sharp quality. Out of the field we are still seeing affordable prices. Place pacs and cherry toms are more reasonable than are romas. Add the various specialty tomatoes to the mix and you have the makings of one heckava display. Sweet basil, olive oil, balsamic vinegar make for a well-rounded cross merchandising opportunity.

NATIONAL MUSHROOM MONTH

September is also National Mushroom Month, sponsored by the Mushroom Council. An aggressive promotional campaign features recipe and meal planning materials for retailers and special events aimed at the more than 52 million Americans who are moderate users of mushrooms. This is a well organized effort that could help make your cash register ring. For more info, log onto the web www.mushroomcouncil.com.

MUSHROOMS

What better time to promote fungi than this month? Portabellas, once a culled crimini and now a booming seller, has doubled and tripled in sales for the past five years. The more varied the array the more activity and \$\$ is generated.

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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