
THE ROADSIDE DIARIES

STRAWBERRY POLITICS

*The Green Thumb knows why the season's first
fruit is so sweet.*

BY E.L. WYVES

WATER MILL—"Are you talking about the strawberry wars?," Bill Halsey of the Green Thumb organic farm in Water Mill said with a smirk. He was referring to the fact that around the beginning of the East End strawberry season, the wholesale price of berries from California plummets, as growers from elsewhere try to muscle in on the short, but lucrative, East End market. To get a jump on the early tourists, some farmstands, restaurants and supermarkets have even been known to pass off imported fruit as local. And some grocers and restaurant owners persistently balk at the higher priced local fruit.

Unsuspecting shoppers whose mouths water at the sight of "Local Strawberry" signs are blissfully ignorant of the politics of strawberries, the first local fruit to show up at most farmstands. (Unless you consider asparagus a fruit, which it's not.) On Highway 27 and Route 25, giant inflatable strawberries beacon road-weary commuters. In kitchens, the strange and seductive red fruit with the seed-riddled flesh is showing up in pies, smoothies, and margaritas. At pick-your-own's from Southampton to Orient Point, children with encrimsoned lips struggle with the age-old dilemma: can you pick faster than you can eat?

Strawberries neatly symbolize a farming mentality that the Halsey family bucked decades ago. As a delicate fruit where blemishes count, strawberries consistently show up at the top of the Department of Agriculture's list of foods that carry pesticide residues, part of the reasons why organic strawberries might cost more. The Green Thumb, the oldest and one of the largest organic farms in New York State, has been on the same oceanside land since 1640. A few decades ago, they began raising tomatoes, corn, peppers, eggplants, and strawberries organically, even as potato-growing neighbors scoffed and were buried under 10,000-square-foot summer homes. The farm's constantly evolving business model seems like a good idea today, but it was prompted by more personal concerns.

"In '68, I got a little dose of spray poisoning," said Ray Halsey, the farm's patriarch. He was forced to take six months off of work. "I was pretty damn sick." His sons Billy and Larry returned from college and decided the farm needed to stop spraying completely, which Ray thought was "impossible." The family started with 10 acres and endured some pretty miserable crops as they changed their methods, found disease-resistant varieties and crop rotations, and improved their soil as a means to healthier plants. They gave tomatoes more space and diligently tied them up to encourage airflow and reduce fungus on leaves. They gave up on sweet corn, since customers refused ears with even a single worm scar. They substituted fish emulsion and compost and manure for ammonia pellets. "It's taken quite



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a while," Ray said laughing. "Was it a good move?," he asked rhetorically. "It was the only move."

The family has been making moves ever since. "It's not enough to grow it, you've got to figure out how to market it," said Johanna Halsey, Bill's sister who manages the family's roadside farmstand, which has been known to create mid-summer traffic jams. Ten years ago, when the family heard about the burgeoning CSA (community supported agriculture) movement, it immediately saw the advantages: a built-in group of customers, one drop-off spot, payment upfront. Now, the farm supplies one CSA in Brooklyn and two in Queens. The latest innovation in marketing are micro-CSAs, known as Jpods (named after Jo), which supply a dozen or so families, including a group at Brookhaven National Labs on the Island. ("I love infiltrating that place," said Jo.) "We're trying to reinvent the wheel and now we're biodynamic which is amazing since they've totally butchered the word organic," she said, referring to the government's much criticized national organic standards.

The market isn't all that's changed. "Twenty years ago, we sold more berries than we do now," said Bill who handles growing strawberries and the farm's hundreds of other fruits, vegetables, and herbs with his brother. "They were a seasonal food. It was much more unique."

Peachie Halsey, Bill's mother, confirmed the recent changes. "When we first opened the stand, people would come from all over and pick flats and flats of strawberries to make jam and pies and to freeze," she said. "As years went on, fewer and fewer people would come and pick. They just didn't have the time."

Today, Mrs. Halsey said, few of her customers are making strawberry jam, strawberry-rhubarb pies, and strawberry shortcakes. And American shoppers can buy berries—not just strawberries, but also blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries—yearround. (The Green Thumb, which carries a range of fruits, vegetables, and packaged

SOUTH FORK



RECIPE

STRAWBERRY RHUBARB VINAIGRETTE

- 1 c. chopped rhubarb
- 1¹/₄ c. chopped strawberries
- 3 large shallots, coarsely chopped
- 1 tbsp. sugar
- ¹/₃ c. red wine vinegar
- ³/₄ c. olive oil
- ¹/₄ tsp. Dijon mustard

Simmer first five ingredients in a small non-reactive saucepan until rhubarb is tender, about 10 minutes. Puree, strain into bowl, and cool. Whisk in oil and mustard. This is wonderful on arugula with goat cheese and more strawberries. Serves 4.

items, carries organic strawberries from Connecticut and southern Canada when its own are not in season.)

“That happened with lots of foods,” said Bill. And the first casualty—even before the local farmer—was taste.

“Nothing tastes like it used to. Carrots, summer squash, corn. You think it tastes good and then you taste your homegrown,” Bill said as he surveyed his three acres of strawberries.

The hunch that strawberries just don’t taste the way they used to might be as much about hard science as irrational nostalgia. “Most varieties today are bred for shipping and shelflife and not for flavor,” Bill said. “A lot of them are just for aesthetics.” He noted that restaurants will often garnish a salad or dessert plate with a big, red, tasteless berry. “They are white on the inside, not red, and they have no taste,” said Jo.

The Green Thumb’s berries have a shelf life of roughly two weeks,

Bill said, and wouldn’t tolerate the trip across the country. But they would triumph in the flavor category. (For the curious and skeptical, the farm will hold a taste test on June 19th.) “Mm,” he groaned, as he bit into a blood-red fruit he had just plucked from a strawberry stem. The flow of juice was audible. “This is a good one.”

The Green Thumb grows five varieties, with names like All Star, Idea, and Winona. Some ripen as early as late May, while others bear into the end of June. The Halseys plant the berries in May to harvest the following June. Like their wild brethren, strawberries are prolific. They send out runners in every direction which put down roots and create daughter plants. (According to *The Oxford Companion to Food*, the fruit gets its name from its “straying,” erratic growth habit, not its affinity for growing on straw bedding.)

After the harvest, the Green Thumb plows under the central row of mother plants, leaving the daughter rows on either side, which will produce fruit the following summer. Each planting yields about two to three years of berries before weeds become a problem and the field is given over to beans or peas. Between the berries, the Halseys often plant oats which snuff out weeds and die back during the winter to provide a straw mulch for the following spring.

Apart from weeds, which the Green Thumb removes with hand-hoes, Bill said diseases aren’t generally a problem. “They are pretty nice berries for being organic,” he said, crediting the way the farm spaces the plants for good air flow (which prevents mildews and rot), the farm’s work to build up the soil (which leads to healthier, more disease-resistant plants), and regular spraying with compost teas and biodynamic preparations by Steve Storch of Natural Science Organics (which builds up the populations of helpful soil life).

Despite the tedious nature of strawberry picking and the relatively short season, Bill thinks it’s a great crop. “People still get excited about it,” he said, “even if they are not eating as much as they should or used to.”

And most farmers agree the cool, sunny spring will yield some spectacular fruit. “It’s good strawberry weather,” Bill said recently. The fruit can stay on the vine longer, and ripen more gradually. “If it’s real hot, they ripen fast, and if you get a shower, they get more rot.”

Politics aside, the sweetest strawberry, Bill said, should have a dark sheen on the outside and red on the inside. “Look for the ones that have their calices standing,” he added, referring to the green petals around the strawberry stem. “And the ones that birds peck.”

Apparently, the birds only discriminate against fruit that isn’t ripe. □

WHAT: The Green Thumb

WHERE: Hwy. 27, Water Mill, 726-1900

WHEN: Daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

MUST TRY: Strawberries, mesclun, greens