
THE ROADSIDE DIARIES

BRIDGEHAMPTON MELONS

*Stinky and orange or seedless and yellow,
summer brings the sweetest fruit.*

BY BRIAN HALWEIL

Last summer, when half a dozen family members and friends independently raved about the muskmelons at Country Gardens, I parked at the farmstand at the triangle defined by Scuttlehole Road, Millstone Road, and Guyers Road, adjacent to the house that looks like a barrel, and ambled over to the cart loaded with melons.

A hand-drawn sign said it all: “Our Own Musk Melons. \$1.99 each. Vine Ripe. Ready to Eat.”

People seek out these melons from as far away as Montauk and Hampton Bays. Even Florida. Gaby Falkowski, who was behind the counter, told me that more than one customer has express mailed a few down to the Sunshine State, as a gift to parents or other relatives who have been enjoying these melons for 30 years. Tom Falkowski, who owns the farm and grows the melons, prefers not to use superlatives. “We’re not the only good melons around,” he said, suggesting instead that “maybe people buy them, because they just like me.”

Or it might be that Bridgehampton loam, an important point of the town’s 350-year history, is particularly suited to growing the sprawling vines and juicy fruit. Halsey Farm Stand on Deerfield Road, Pike Farms on Sagg Main Street and Hayground Market on Highway 27 also sell noteworthy melons. Just as the scorching days of summer become too much, melons come to the rescue. At B. Smith’s on Long Wharf in Sag Harbor, diners look forward to this season and B.’s Watermelon Margarita made with the juice of fresh local watermelons. At Foody’s in Water Mill, Brian Futerman starts blending his spicy-sweet and incredibly refreshing watermelon-red pepper gazpacho.

Such variations are nice, but the melon is one fruit that needs little doctoring, assuming it is raised properly. “My dad grew them in the 50s,” said Falkowski who has been raising muskmelons for his farmstand since 1972 and whose years of practice might explain why

his are so popular. “That’s where I got my experience. I’ve tried to isolate the best varieties. If you do something for enough years, you weed out the ones you don’t like and hit one that’s good.”

Close relatives of the cucumber, and around as long as the Egyptians, muskmelons were named for their strong, sweet aroma. They are sometimes called common melons or netted melons for the raised, cross-hatch pattern that covers their pale rind. Inside, the ripe flesh is orange. (It’s good for you, too—half a melon will meet your daily requirement for Vitamin A and C—and a 6-ounce slice only carries about 50 calories.)

Muskmelons shouldn’t be confused with cantaloupes, although Falkowski said that breeders have crossed the two, and that has reduced the visible differences.

“Musk is deep-ribbed with a rougher skin,” he said. (Several common muskmelon varieties in North America are called “cantaloupe,” although the true cantaloupe, named for a town near Rome, and common in Europe, is a smaller melon with smooth skin.) A local home gardener hinted at a fruit rivalry, when he told me that



“muskmelon is what cantaloupe aspires to be.”

“Over the years, in the eastern part of the country, we didn’t really grow cantaloupes,” said Falkowski. “They grew them in the western part of the country, because they shipped better and liked the climate.” Hot and dry conditions made last year one of the East End’s best melon seasons in recent memory. This year, the cold, wet May

set the melons back, but a warmer June has remedied that.

“They’re all cantaloupes,” said Lorraine Reeves, who with her husband Brad and two sons runs Hayground Market and Hayground Farm on Highway 27 and Bayview Farm on Main Road in Aquebogue. The Reeves grow melons on both forks. “Everybody will refer to them as muskmelon, but that’s an old variety. We grow a better hybrid variety.”

Down the road from Country Gardens, on Deerfield by way of Head of Pond, another Tom—Tom Halsey—grows muskmelons. Walk into the Halsey Farm Stand, and the air inside is thick with melon ambrosia. In addition to muskmelon for \$2.25 each, the shop features several types of melon worth trying, including yellow seedless watermelon, yellow watermelon with seeds, red seedless watermelon, red watermelon with seeds, and passport melon. A sugar nut melon, with bright yellow skin and light green flesh like a honeydew, rivaled the fragrance and sweetness of the muskmelon.

In past decades, the Long Island growing season didn’t give mel-

“First, it’s sweet corn, then tomatoes, and then muskmelons.”

To ensure that he has ripe melons from the last week of July to the middle of September, Falkowski staggers his crop, planting eight or nine sets. “We plant on a weekly basis, and we pick on a daily basis,” he explained. “When a new patch comes in, we keep moving straight across the board, and we leave the other stuff. Everything has a peak. And we don’t pick them unless they’re ripe.” Which means that any for sale at Country Gardens are ready to eat, even though the person at the cash register may on occasion spot an imperfect fruit and advise the customer to pick another.

“The key thing with melons is where the stem attaches to the fruit,” said Tom Wickham. (People named “Tom” seem to predominate as melon growers on the North Fork as well. In addition to cantaloupes, muskmelons, galias—an Israeli honeydew-type melon—honeydews, and a few watermelons, Wickham’s Fruit Farm on the Main Road in Cutchogue is planting charentais melons for the first time this year. A traditional French melon, its modern varieties look like muskmelons, with a deep-orange flesh and a honey-like flavor. Wickham’s is also trying to get a jump on the season by raising some melons entirely in its greenhouses.) Wickham continued: “When the fruit becomes ripe, the stem severs and drops off from the fruit. And it actually opens up. And if it gets dead ripe it actually falls completely off.”

So look for melon with no stem remaining. “A ripe melon is more of a golden color and an unripe is more of a green,” said Wickham. He also looks for fruits with a uniform color, since variances in color indicate that the fruit didn’t ripen completely, was damaged, or wasn’t grown properly. But don’t trust your nose. “People smell them all over,” Wickham said. “They all smell nice and smell well. To my mind, that’s not a very good judge of ripeness. It’s more a judge of how a melon smells.”

A good muskmelon smells vaguely overripe, but the peachy, tropical taste reveals no fermented sourness. A lucky eater will encounter still-intact flesh that has begun to turn soft and veiny on its way to disintegration. Storing melons in a bag will accelerate their demise. They’ll keep longer in the fridge, but purists may just cool their fruit for a half an hour or so before serving.

Several shoppers advised thumping on melons to find the ripe ones. But Mr. Falkowski said the hollow-sound technique was best used for watermelons.

“A lot of people tend to squeeze musk melons, and I don’t know where they learned that,” he said. “I like one that’s got some weight to it—heavier than it looks like it should be—and a shiny green on the stem end. I could see a ripe one six feet away.”

Uncertain shoppers will do best to take his word for it. □

RECIPE

WATERMELON GAZPACHO

8 c. finely diced seedless watermelon (about 6 lbs. with the rind)	1/4 c. chopped fresh basil
1 medium cucumber, peeled, seeded and finely diced	1/4 c. chopped flat-leaf parsley
1/2 red bell pepper, finely diced	3 tbsp. red-wine vinegar
	2 tbsp. minced shallot
	2 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
	3/4 tsp. salt

Mix all ingredients in a large bowl. Puree 3 c. of the mixture in a blender or food processor to the desired smoothness; transfer to another large bowl. Puree another 3 c. and add to the bowl. Stir in the remaining diced mixture. Serve at room temperature or chilled. (Add hot pepper for some kick.) Serves 6.



ons enough hot days to mature, Halsey noted, so most melons came from the southern states. But varieties that ripen earlier and techniques for lengthening the season have solved that problem. Halsey starts his muskmelon seeds in the greenhouse in early spring, and then plants the seedlings on raised beds covered with plastic mulch (to heat the soil) and drapes the plants with spun-bonded fiber (to protect them from cold). “It’s a very popular item,” Halsey noted.

Please see map on p. 34 for farm locations and hours.