

Most Fruitful Season Ends With A Lover's Lament



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Summertime is the season for lovers everywhere, or so it has been said. Those who count themselves among the smitten have a little time still to celebrate; Sept. 21 marks summer's official end. Floridians might get to stretch this a bit longer with a warm September.

But for a different kind of lover, summer's come and gone for a couple of weeks already — no matter what the calendar says.

The signs read clear on farmers' market tables and on the shelves of grocery stores. Mangoes feel rock-hard; blueberries are small and expensive and unsatisfying. Peaches and nectarines are nowhere to be found for sale along the back roads. Cherries have disappeared and the last melons are holding on.

For lovers of fresh fruit, the end of the abundant season leaves an ache that runs deep.

But what a summer it was.

It all began with the blueberries. Early June saw these summer beauties' arrival in grocery stores. Pints hailed from Michigan, North Carolina, New Jersey, New Hampshire and

Florida. I never knew which state could claim the best ones, so every grocery day I would pluck a berry from each. I decided that the Michigan and New Jersey berries taste best.

I followed the advice a local grower gave me: he berries should always be a powdery, grayish blue. If they were not quite ripe, I could remedy that by placing them in a brown bag with an apple.

I ate them on cereal, in yogurt, in muffins and by hand. I might have eaten nothing else if peaches and nectarines hadn't come to town.

My radar for roadside stands is sharp, so when early June ap-

proached, I knew to be on the lookout. I bought bushel upon bushel of the Georgia gems, seeking wisdom from their growers. (Is the only difference between peaches and nectarines the fuzz? Don't you find peaches the more fragile of the two?)

Mid-June brought cherries, most notable among them the delicate Rainier. Washington state's famous fruit somehow survives the journey to Florida during a season that peaks around July 4.

These look pretty and plump with a golden-red "blush" about them. With 4 percent more sugar, they taste sweeter than their cabernet-colored cousin, the Bing cherry.

Through June and July, I bought them shamelessly, thanks to a sweet-voiced lady who saw me eyeing them in Publix one day at \$3.99 a quart.

"You're thinking about it, aren't you?" she asked, sensing my hesitancy.

"I know they're pricey, but they're only here a few weeks each year — so do it. You won't be sorry."

That did it. I put a few things back

from my cart and bought them. When I looked over my grocery receipts from July, I realized that this frugal shopper had spent a small fortune on cherries.

And then there is the mango. This gorgeous fruit will forever signal sum-

mer to me. I remember when I tried my first one, during the summer of 1996, and my subsequent thrill at learning how to slice one just right — carve a grid into each half, then push it inside out so it looks like a porcupine.

The only way to eat a mango is with a spirit of surrender. One has to give

in to getting messy, with juice dripping down the chin. I can taste one right now. Every time I take a ripe mango in my hand to smell it, I go back. Every time.

Maybe it's in the blood. My grandfather took special delight in the ripe fruit of the season. He knew just how to cut a peach with a paring knife — a true art. I feel connected to him every time I find joy in a piece of fresh fruit.

There is a dependability about the harvests that return each year. To take part in them is to feel in sync with the earth's rhythms, and that feels good.

Autumn approaches and offers consolation with promises of apple and pears and pumpkins and squash. But I still catch myself scouting for mangoes.



Mango mastery: An inherited art.



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