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Market Watch: Romanesco cauliflower's spectacular looks

The cauliflower mutation, available at some farmers markets, displays a fractal pattern in the growth of its florets. It's sometimes marketed as a broccoli.



Romanesco cauliflower grown by Weiser Family Farms of Tehachapi and Lucerne Valley, at the Hollywood farmers market. (David Karp)

By David Karp, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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Of all the produce available at farmers markets, far and away the most spectacular is the Romanesco cauliflower. Typically smaller than a standard cauliflower, vivid chartreuse and conical in shape, it displays an ornate fractal pattern in which each floret presents the same appearance as the whole head, in miniature. The result is that the eye zooms in on one turret, then another, and gets mesmerized by the swirling, logarithmic spiral of its self-repeating design.

"We've got groupies who come to stare at them, particularly at the Pasadena farmers market, where there are lots of Cal Tech students," says Alex Weiser, who grows 21/2 acres of Romanesco in Lamont and Tehachapi, southeast of Bakersfield. During harvest he himself sometimes gets transfixed gazing at particularly dazzling specimens.

Because of its pale green tinge, Romanesco has often been popularly considered to be a broccoli, or a broccoflower, a hybrid of broccoli and cauliflower, and marketed as such. Cauliflower and broccoli are different forms of the same species, *Brassica oleracea*, and interbreeding has eroded the boundary between the two. Genetic analyses have confirmed that Romanesco is just a mutation of cauliflower in which the branch apical meristems, the growing stems, develop in a way that produces angular,

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pyramidal curds in a regular mathematical pattern. (There are also green varieties of cauliflower with the conventional round shape, common in our markets, and a whitish yellow Italian type, di Jesi, that has spiraling florets.)

The Romanesco type is a traditional crop in the area around Rome and Naples, dating back at least to the 16th century. But it has only been grown commercially here for the last 10 to 15 years, since the development of hybrid varieties like Veronica and the greater availability of open-pollinated varieties such as Minaret and Natalino. It may never become a mainstream crop because the fractal florets are delicate and tend to break off when jostled in transit.

Even at farmers markets, Romanesco still fetches a premium over regular cauliflower, because the seed is about three times as expensive, says John Givens, who grows about one-sixth of an acre of the Veronica variety in Goleta, and sells at more than a dozen locations, including Encino, Studio City, Pacific Palisades, Mar Vista and Hollywood.

Like other cauliflower, Romanesco generally grows best in cool weather, and so is most abundant in fall and winter. "The further you go into spring, the heads get smaller and smaller," says Givens, who recently started his harvest and will offer Romanesco for the next two weeks.

Like other cauliflowers, Romanesco is at its best within a few days of harvest; when stored for more than a week it can develop unpleasant cabbagey off-flavors.

Weiser, who sells at many markets, including Claremont, Pasadena Saturday, Long Beach Sunday, Santa Monica and Hollywood, likes to bake Romanesco with olive oil, garlic, salt and pepper at 450 degrees for 20 minutes.

Compared with regular cauliflower, Romanesco has a distinctive nubby texture that carries through when cooked. Its flavor is often described as sweeter and nuttier than that of regular cauliflower, but I'm not sure I could tell the difference if blindfolded.

Perhaps that's for the best, because if this fractal wonder's flavor were as captivating as its looks, it might imperil the human race, since people would forget about everything else and just eat Romanesco.

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