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Market Watch: A world of extraordinary flavors in specialty and exotic strawberries

Commercial varieties are bred for firmness and shelf life. But older, more fragile breeds can be intensely aromatic and delicious. If only more growers would produce them.



Wild strawberries grown by Pudwill Berry Farms in Nipomo at the Santa Monica farmers market. (David Karp / For The Times / July 1, 2009)

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The mild climate along California's coast enables its strawberry growers to dominate commercial production of this fruit; last year they accounted for some 88% of the nation's crop. For strawberry lovers, that's both a blessing, of abundance and reasonable prices, and a curse, because local growers are focused almost exclusively on varieties suited to industrial production. Compared with other states where local sales predominate, California strawberry breeders prioritize firmness and long shelf life, often at the expense of flavor.

Our farmers market growers can offer riper fruit than is harvested for supermarkets, but they are stuck using commercial varieties because no one in California is breeding new varieties suited for direct sales and nurseries, for the most part, don't want to be bothered with older varieties. That's a shame because there's a whole world of different and extraordinary flavors that could await enterprising growers and their customers.

Last week, I wrote a buying guide to farmers market strawberries focused on standard varieties from the University of California breeding program. Let us now consider specialty and exotic strawberry varieties, both from farmers markets and further afield.

My favorite strawberry variety in the market right now is Galante, grown by Jerry Rutiz in Arroyo Grande, on the Central Coast, which he sells at the Santa Monica Wednesday farmers market. Deep orange-red when fully ripe, its most remarkable qualities are its texture, which is delicate and juicy, and its intense flavor, which has hints of melon. Bred by David Small of California Giant and introduced about six years ago, it has not succeeded as a commercial variety because the berries bruise easily and they rot quickly after rainstorms — particularly Rutiz's crop, which is unsprayed.



Alpine strawberries, also called "wild" strawberries or *fraises des bois*, are a different species (*Fragaria vesca*), much smaller, softer and more aromatic than most varieties of the common garden strawberry (*F. ananassa*). A romantic allure accompanies them, but they're only at their best when fully developed and ripe; underripe fruits are sour, overripe ones are mushy, and tiny, scrawny specimens covered with seeds are bitter.

Their shelf life is the blink of an eye, and they're insanely laborious to pick, so just a few growers raise them, notably Pudwill Berry Farms of Nipomo and Jaime Farms of City of Industry, which mainly sell these fragile berries at Santa Monica Wednesday. Pudwill recently cut back their plants and won't have wild strawberries for another month or so;

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Jaime will have them through June or July, but in small quantities, which tend to be scooped up by purveyors for restaurants, so one must stop by as the market opens or reserve in advance. Really, the ideal approach is to grow one's own; Michael Wellik of the Strawberry Store in Delaware, an unparalleled resource, sells plants and seed of 20 varieties.



Mara des Bois, a cultivated strawberry introduced by the Marionnet nursery in France in 1991, contains high levels of methyl anthranilate, the volatile compound that perfumes *fraises des bois*. Small to medium in size and deep red, with soft, melting flesh, it has such an intense aroma when ripe that many people mistakenly suppose it to be a hybrid of wild and cultivated species. It's the standard of quality for strawberries at French markets, but the only source in Southern California is Chino Nojo, the chic, famously secretive farm north of San Diego (6123 Calzada Del Bosque, Rancho Santa Fe; [858] 756-3184; no website). Both Wellik and Nourse Farms sell the plants. When will farmers market growers catch on?

The modern strawberry (*F. ananassa*) originated in Europe in the 18th century from chance crosses of two wild species, the Virginian and Chilean, inheriting from the former hardiness, sharp flavor and redness. Virginian strawberries are almost never cultivated for sale as fresh fruit, but one can enjoy their essence in the exquisite Tiptree Little Scarlet strawberry jam made by Wilkin & Sons in England, which is available at the Continental Shop in Santa Monica (\$13.99 for 12 ounces) and from various mail-order sources. For home gardeners, Wellik sells two selections of Virginian.

In the last few weeks there's been considerable buzz and a fair bit of confusion, about a white strawberry that supposedly tastes like pineapple, which is being marketed in Europe as the "pineberry." Some commentators even suspected that the "news" was just an April Fool's Day publicity stunt.

It was introduced by Hans De Jongh, a farmer in Etten-Leur, the Netherlands, whose family used to grow Little Scarlet, and who now specializes in ultra-high-quality heirloom strawberries, all raised in greenhouses. "Its flavor does not resemble pineapples in my opinion, but it's very juicy and aromatic," he says. "The smell is like perfume. Even if you have only a few strawberries, you can smell them in your whole room."

He does not know the original name of this variety, which he obtained from an elderly French strawberry variety collector, but he believes that it dates back to the first generation of crosses between the Virginian and Chilean species in the 18th century. When he found the original plant it was small and sickly, so he used tissue culture, a laboratory method of propagation, to rid it of disease.

When his marketer, VitalBerry (a major international berry company) first offered this oddity to sellers they demurred at the high prices. "They said, 'Oof, little soft strawberries, we don't like it,'" De Jongh remembers. But in time it caught on with chefs and high-end retailers, and now is sold in small quantities from London to Moscow.

De Jongh has also revived cultivation of a variety with a flavor and aroma even better than that of Mara des Bois, being marketed as strasberry, which he believes may actually be an old German home garden favorite, Miebe Schindler.

Several government and private breeders, domestic and foreign, are now working on developing white strawberries and ultra-high-flavored varieties, for both local and commercial sales, and it seems likely that some will be available here within a few years. Let's hope that California strawberry nurseries and farmers market growers grasp the opportunity to profit by fulfilling the flavor potential of the strawberry, the most noble but sorely abused of berries.

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