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Market Watch: Green almonds

The unusual crop has a short season and dedicated fans, including several adventurous L.A. chefs.

By David Karp, Special to the Los Angeles Times
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Reporting from Wasco, Calif. — Green almonds, which look like small, immature, teardrop-shaped peaches, have started showing up at farmers markets, attracting attention from adventurous chefs. A traditional snack in the Mediterranean and Middle East, they're a foretaste of the main almond harvest to come. But they also have a particular allure from their velvety appearance and ultra-seasonal availability.

The first green almonds are tender enough to eat whole and have a herbaceous taste, like a raw pea pod, but tart and astringent. Later the hull and shell toughen and the seed, which hardens from translucent jelly to a crunchy white nutlet, is the only part eaten. The season lasts just a month or so.

The commercial harvest of mature almonds, in late summer, is highly mechanized, but the collection of green almonds is utterly low-tech. On a gorgeous mild morning last week, in this small town 25 miles northwest of Bakersfield, Nate Siemens of Fat Uncle Farms walked through a lush 18-acre almond orchard and simply plucked off the low-hanging fruits into brown paper bags.

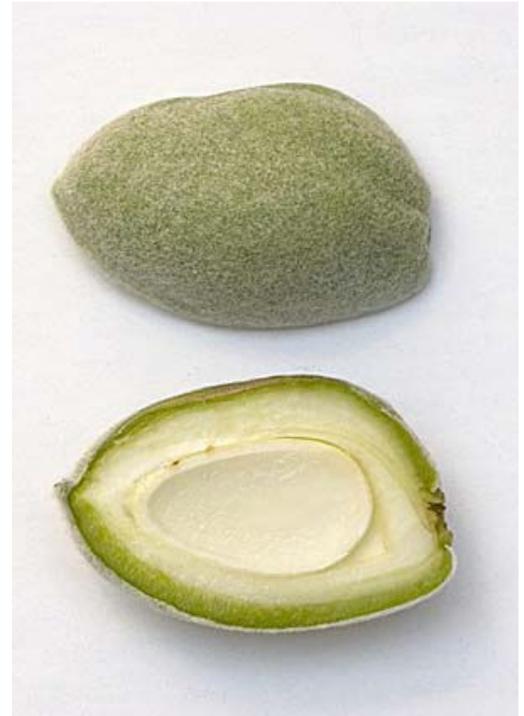
The next morning at the Santa Monica farmers market, a crowd of curious customers clustered around Fat Uncle's stand, ogling and fondling the fuzzy little fruits, and asking what to do with them.

Using whole green almond fruits is a challenge, because they're so intense, but to a certain type of chef, smitten by traditional Mediterranean foods, they're catnip. Vinny Dotolo of Animal will be doing a shaved raw green almond and rhubarb salad. Jason Mattick of Palate Food + Wine slices the whole fruits very thin and serves them over diver scallops in a brown butter sauce. "It adds a bite of tannic acidity," he says.

More commonly, only the kernel is used. Gary Menes, who first encountered green almonds as a chef on the fish station at the French Laundry 11 years ago, has come up with a green almond tasting menu that he may serve starting May 7 at his four-week pop-up, Quartier, at Olive & Thyme in Toluca Lake.

It starts with a mache salad with green almond kernels, arugula flowers, *fines herbes*, Sicilian olive oil and *verjus*. For a middle course, rouget with green almond nutlets, orange confit and grilled fennel — "a thinking man's relish," he calls it. For dessert, Menes offers strawberries with green almond kernels, lime juice and yogurt, drizzled with 50-year-old balsamic vinegar.

David Campbell, pastry chef at Providence, uses a truffle slicer to cut whole green almonds very thin and serves them as a garnish on panna cotta. In Europe, and increasingly here, cooks add green almond kernels to preserves made from their kindred stone fruits, apricots and peaches.



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Bringing green almonds is the latest extension for Fat Uncle Farms, which markets a wide array of almonds and almond products, including whole and slivered nuts, six flavors of "blistered" almonds, almond milk, almond butter, almond meal and marzipan.

The farm started 30 years ago when Alan Townsend, an agriculture business major at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo who had come to Wasco to work as a manager for Armstrong Nurseries, planted his first almond orchard. Although the nursery was sold soon thereafter, he went to work for Standard Oil of California, now Chevron, in the local oil fields, to keep the almond planting going. Now 62, he retired five years ago and still loves working his orchard, which grows Nonpareil, the standard almond variety, and Avalon, a newer pollinator.

Traditionally, most of the almond crop was grown farther north in the Central Valley, from Merced to Chico. Increased availability of water via irrigation and production economies through mechanization led to a huge boom in almond plantings in the southern San Joaquin Valley, particularly in Kern County, which now boasts 134,000 acres of almonds, tied for tops in the state.

Townsend marketed most of his crop to Blue Diamond, a large cooperative, until two years ago, when his son Ryan and son-in-law Nate Siemens started selling at farmers markets. Siemens had earned a degree in plant genetics at UCLA, where he met Bekki, Townsend's eldest daughter; they married and now have three children, ages 2 to 13. After teaching junior high school for a few years in Los Angeles, and English in China, he was trying to figure out what to do next. He had grown up just south of Wasco, where his grandfather had farmed almonds, and he and Bekki had often helped out on the farm. He started preparing almond products in a certified kitchen in Santa Barbara, managed to get into the fine local farmers market, and was off and running.

Last year, Siemens got into the main Santa Monica market, on Wednesdays, and sales really took off; he expects that farmers markets will take three-quarters of the farm's 2011 crop. Has he, at age 36, found his life's work? "I'm not sure," he says with a laugh. "The big appeal to me is actually the people, in the social aspect of farming, and giving people access to the food-industrial complex."

The big appeal to customers is high-quality, locally grown almonds, from a vendor who specializes in one crop and does it well. Fat Uncle's green almonds, at once esoteric and familiar, may never account for massive sales, but they create a stir and intrigue chefs.

"It's a great ingredient, underutilized only because it's just available three or four weeks out of the year," Menes says.

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