

Los Angeles Times

FOOD

Market Watch: A rare shot at delicate Comice pears

Also, Sweet Scarlet offers muscat taste without seeds, and — could it be? — a Mirabelle de Metz plum.



Comice pears grown by Jeff Rieger in Penryn, at the Santa Monica farmers market. (David Karp / September 29, 2010)

By David Karp, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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While the weather has careened in the last week from broiling to chilly and sodden and back to warm, and summer produce, such as peaches, peppers and eggplants, continue to be offered at farmers markets, a change is in the air, independent of the temperature: We're seeing more and more typically autumnal crops like pears, apples, squash, chestnuts, pumpkins, pomegranates and even the first few persimmons.

Especially worth searching out is the most celebrated and luscious of pears, Comice, which originated in the Loire Valley in 1849. In the United States, most Comices are raised around Medford, in Southern Oregon, for the gift fruit market; they are hardly grown in Southern California, but Jeffrey Rieger of Penryn, a relic of a formerly flourishing pear district in the Sierra foothills, will bring his fruit to next Wednesday's Santa Monica farmers market.

For no pear is careful storage and handling more necessary than for the Comice, which seems to bruise if looked at askance. When the skin has passed from green to yellow, and the flesh near the stem gives slightly to gentle pressure, the time has arrived to savor the thickset but voluptuous fruit, first cutting it into sections and paring off the gritty, astringent skin. At its best, the white flesh is incomparably tender, juicy, perfumed and sweet. (It's so juicy and delicate that it is not ideal for cooking; the russeted Bosc, which Rieger also offers, holds its texture better in culinary use.)

From other sources Comice does not always live up to its potential, but Rieger is a fanatic for conditioning and coddling his pears, and marketgoers are catching on. Plan to arrive early, before his supplies sell out.

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Knowledgeable fruit lovers have long considered muscats, which have a distinctive floral aroma and are very sweet, to be the finest of table grapes. However, all the classic varieties, such as Muscat of Alexandria and Italia, have seeds, which unfortunately makes them unacceptable to most modern consumers. Grape breeders long sought to hybridize seedless muscats and did introduce varieties such as Perlette and Princess with mild muscat flavor, which mostly shows up when they are very ripe; but Sweet Scarlet, a crimson, oval variety released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2004, offers fuller muscat flavor in a seedless grape.

Commercial farmers have not rushed to plant Sweet Scarlet because it is tricky to grow, requiring that clusters be tipped, vines be girdled and the fruit be treated with gibberellic acid. Even so, the berries tend to be modest in size. But Scott Farms of Dinuba offers it at the Mar Vista, Westchester and Santa Monica Wednesday markets, along with sugary, dead-ripe Princess and Muscat of Alexandria.

Crimson Gold, a tiny, flattish apple with a red flush overlaying a cream ground color, looks like a crabapple, cooks well and makes a cute garnish, but with its rich flavor and crunchy flesh, it actually is an extraordinarily fine variety for eating fresh. It originated with the great fruit breeder Albert Etter (1872-1950) in Humboldt County and undoubtedly does have crabapple ancestry. Chincholo Farms grows Crimson Gold near Stockton and sells through Arnett Farms at many Southern California farmers markets, including Torrance, Manhattan Beach, Brentwood and Hollywood.

Mirabelles, small golden or greenish-yellow fruits used for making preserves, tarts and brandies, are grown on about 5,000 acres in France, mostly in the northeastern region of Lorraine. They're pleasant enough to eat fresh too, but for some reason they have never caught on in the United States, and when one finds a plum sold as mirabelle at local farmers markets, it is usually a form of myrobalan, another small and similar-looking plum but of a different species, widely used for rootstock and generally inferior in eating quality.

Last Sunday, however, there was a true mirabelle sighting at the Hollywood market, where Kyung Ha and her husband, David, who grow in Tehachapi, were not quite sure which plum they were selling; but when Kyung checked her records, she found that it was the classic Mirabelle de Metz, the smaller of the two leading varieties. If chefs ever discover that they can obtain this legendary European plum here, we may be seeing more of it on local menus and at markets.

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