



FACES: Amelia Saltsman and JoAnn Cianciulli

Summer, And The Farmers Markets, Are In Full Bloom. Find Out What L.A.'s Two Foremost Farmers Markets Experts Have To Say About That.

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Summer is in full bloom, and so are Los Angeles' farmers markets. For this month's FACES, we talked with L.A.'s two foremost farmers market experts, Amelia Saltsman and JoAnn Cianciulli.

Saltsman is the author of 2007's ***Santa Monica Farmers' Market Cookbook***. Cianciulli has also just written a new book, titled, ***L.A.'s Original Farmers Market Cookbook***, just in time for the 75th anniversary of the **Farmers Market**.

We talked with Saltsman and Cianciulli about just what it is that makes Los Angeles's farmers markets so special, and how the average home cook can take advantage of their bounty.

LA.com: Los Angeles has over 80 farmers markets! What do you think sets them apart from others around the country?

Amelia Saltsman: One of the things that makes us so unique is that we have 365 growing days a year, so that we're able take advantage of all the seasons more readily than some other areas. I think that's why California has been such a leader in the seasonal, ingredient-driven style of cooking. It's all about

having a sense of place, which is what JoAnn talks about in her book.

JoAnn Cianciulli: What's specific about L.A. is that it is a global melting pot. In the Fairfax farmers market, you have people from all over-Mexico, Central America, there's a French place. There are different pockets all over the city; communities like Thai town that are different than anywhere else. Most of the people I know aren't even from here.

AS: It's interesting you say that, because you're from New York, and I am a native Angeleno. I used to go to the Fairfax market as a little girl. We could take our guests to this wonderful, bustling, open-air marketplace that offered a lot of visual and taste impact. It's very much an anchor in the L.A. scene.

JC: People all over the country come there. I think that is key; that a food destination has become a tourist destination here in Los Angeles.

LA.com: Why do you think there is so much interest in farmers markets now? Does it have to do with economizing? Environmentalism? The fact that people just want to know where their food is coming from?

JC: Farmers markets are becoming so ubiquitous. It's on everyone's tongues. It's the way everyone is thinking. Chefs are cooking that way. It's an international way of cooking and thinking.

AS: The answer to all your questions is: yes. The farmers market movement is all about an awareness of many components. It's about the environment, the need to protect farmland so we don't just become an urban wasteland, and about thinking locally. L.A. is a sprawling megalopolis, but there are still farms in L.A. County. Much of our food that comes from small farms is grown within a 50-100 mile radius. In terms of carbon footprints, health issues and food safety, that makes an important statement. I also think we are hungry for real flavor, and for interaction with the growers and learning about our food.

LA.com: What should your average shopper or home cook do to make the most of a visit to the farmers market?

JC: We just need to use our senses-smell everything, look at the color, the feel, talk to the people that grew it. It's fun to go to the farmers market with a bunch of people. It's like a buffet! You taste, you shop, and you know what you're getting. One of my favorite parts is that farmers invite you to try their product, because when you make a decision, flavor is key.

AS: The average shopper can be intimidated or overwhelmed if they're not

familiar with shopping in this way. As with anything, you just have to start, and you have to use all your senses to understand why this is important and why it works. Ask questions. The more you go, the more familiar it becomes, and you develop relationships. What is really important for the home cook who doesn't have a lot of time and who isn't looking to create fancy, vertical food on the plate is that truly ripe, fresh ingredients raised for flavor and quality-the simplest and most common ingredients-are all there for them. When you have great food, you don't need to do much to it.

LA.com: What are some of the most interesting, special or crazy things that you've found at our farmer's markets?

AS: What makes my mouth water are the everyday foods like peas or the best tasting Swiss chard. Things you never thought would be worthy of writing an ode to. You know it's good when you're waxing poetic about potatoes and onions. A couple years ago, one of the farmers started bringing big bundles of little pods on branches, and I thought, what was that? Each pod 1.5 inches long, opened it up and inside were two perfectly formed green garbanzo beans. You stop and think, wait, how do garbanzo beans grow and what do they look like when they're not in the can. If you were at a market in India, you would find these bundles of green garbanzo beans in spring and early summer. That was such an exciting discovery, and what was equally exciting was that responsible farmers grow legumes in they're crop rotation because it replenishes the soil. It's a great sustainable practice that the farmer can turn around and sell. It's a great cycle of nourishing the field, cleaning the environment, and producing delicious food.

JC: Garbanzos really got me too. I first saw them about four years ago, and it was shocking to see them still green. It was the color that made me think, "What are those?"

AS: When it's a seasonal thing, you enjoy them green and young in one particular way, and then late in the season, they're golden and starchier and very different.

LA.com: Is that the key to farmers markets-inspiration, reinvigoration, the reinvention of everyday foods?

JC: Yes. What's that saying? "Sometimes the best ingredient is the one the chef left out"? There is something remarkable and tastefully simple about not muddling ingredients, and letting them sing on their own without doing too much. If it's already fresh, it already has the perfect flavor, and it's almost disrespectful to mess with it.

AS: Absolutely. The upside to all this is that it makes food preparation that much easier. If it already tastes good you don't have to do anything!