

DE GUSTIBUS;Where Summer Exits in Glory The New York Times September 14, 1988, Wednesday, Late City Final Edition

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SOME people choose to call this the end of summer. I prefer to think of it as the moment when summer preens, showing off its finest produce, as at the Union Square Greenmarket.

The flowers are more brilliant, the fruits and vegetables more intensely flavored and the abundance and variety more astonishing than perhaps at any other time of the year.

September is when the harvests of autumn and summer vie for space. Even after a summer that has been unkind to farmers, the display of produce seen on a stroll through the market belies whatever problems there have been.

Last week I had to fight the urge to buy armloads of zinnias, yellow and red cherry tomatoes by the bushel, and some of the 20 different hot and sweet peppers.

As the Union Square Greenmarket gets older, it gets better. Opened in 1977, it operates on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays from early in the morning until late afternoon, or when the food is gone - whichever comes first. There is very little there that you cannot buy in the way of fresh fruits and vegetables, herbs, cheeses, meats, fish and poultry and baked goods. And every year the 50 or so vendors provide a greater assortment.

The Union Square Greenmarket of 1977 was a far different place. Farmers found that the customers were less adventurous and less sophisticated. Back then, lovage was something you read about in ancient herb books; today this celery-flavored herb is enjoying a renaissance. When the market first opened, people were delighted to find fresh basil. Now they want opal or purple basil, and lemon basil.

You hardly need to go to Chinatown anymore to find a wide assortment of Chinese vegetables. The **Ryder Farm** of Brewster, N.Y., which has a stand at the market on Wednesdays and Saturdays, offers more and more of these vegetables each year: daikon, bok choy, Chinese cabbage and mustard greens, all organically grown.

"More and more people come to us because we are organic," said Hall Gibson, owner of the farm.

In fact the number of stands offering organically grown produce seems to increase each year as the concern about pesticides is translated into new buying patterns.

"There is greater diversity here every year," Mr. Gibson said.

The Union Square market belies the dictum that people will not go out of their neighborhoods to shop. People come from all over to this Manhattan site, including the other boroughs.

They come for some of the finest goat cheese manufactured in this country. Goat Works sells a salt-free soft cheese that has the consistency of a creme fraiche with a delightful tang. It is a fine low-fat substitute for sour cream.

Goat Works also sells what it calls a mini buche. It is smooth-textured and slightly sharp and has a particularly well-flavored herb coating.

The company's owner, Gail Kessler, who is at the market Wednesdays and Saturdays, said: "Business has changed drastically for us in the nine years we've been here. In the beginning, the reaction to goat cheese was 'yuk,' and I used to come only with my fresh cheeses. Now I can sell the pungent ones."

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Yet at another stand, Hawthorne Valley Farm's quark is not selling like hot cakes. Perhaps this superb low-fat alternative to cream cheese, made in Ghent, N.Y., lacks the cachet of goat cheese. But the farm's pizza slices on whole-wheat crusts do quite well, and justifiably so. They are generously covered with tomatoes and cheese made at the farm.

Several other Italian breads always draw a crowd at the market. Focaccia from Baker's Bounty is one of New York's best, with a tender, fresh yeast base and herbaceous tomato topping. The bakery's stromboli, in several flavors, should be reheated, but it is also good at room temperature.

And even though I know I am looking for trouble when I say this, the potato knish from Baker's Bounty, which is in Kenilworth, N.J., is the best commercial knish I have eaten.

For something simpler, the whole-wheat baguette has just the right amount of crust and a tender interior. The Baker's Bounty stand is open each day the market is open.

Several of the sweets at the Good Earth Bakery, which is based in Claverack, N.Y., are made with whole-wheat flour.

This ingredient will make you feel a trifle more virtuous about eating oatmeal-raisin cookies, chocolate chip cookies and blueberry bran muffins. And you ought to try Good Earth's whole-wheat raisin bread spread with quark from Hawthorne Valley.

But if you prefer to satisfy your sweet tooth with fruits, right now you can find strawberries, cantaloupes, white and yellow peaches, nectarines, wild blueberries and yellow-flesh watermelons. These watermelons, the size of a cantaloupe, have a sugar-sweet taste.

This season of such extravagant bounty is short. Before you know it, the market vendors will be selling Christmas trees. So if you have never made your way to Union Square, today is not too soon.

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GRAPHIC: Photo of the Union Square Greenmarket (NYT/Sara Krulwich)

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