

STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER :

By BRIAN MacLEOD
Herald Special

For three to five weeks beginning the middle of June hundreds of anxious dessert lovers can be seen on all fours crouching over rows of fragaria carefully selecting the very best.

Yes, it's that time of year again - strawberry picking season. The Pick-Your-Own strawberry business is alive and well in southern Ontario. Last year Canada's largest strawberry-producing province harvested over 20 million quarts of the little red berries. Seventy per cent of that was harvested through pick-your-own operations, according to an Ontario government report. While the pick-your-own strawberry industry has stabilized since its rapid growth in 1979 the value of last year's harvest was estimated at \$3 million. Strawberries lead all fruits and vegetables in the pick-your-own business. Since 1979 the number of strawberry pickers has doubled to 265 in Ontario. One popular strawberry operation in the Halton Hills area is Al Ferri and Sons Apple and Strawberry farm on Heritage Road north of Stouffville. Mr. Ferri has been farming his land since the early 1930s. He currently farms between 12 to 15 acres of strawberries every year. Pick-your-own started in the United States about 25 years ago, Mr. Ferri says. "It was mostly farmers' wives and locals," (picking berries then), he recalls. It took about ten years but word of mouth proved to be the catalyst in the growth of the strawberry in-

dustry, he said.

"As the years went by every Tom, Dick and Harry got into the act and it became a cut-throat business," he says.

But he was quick to add, "farming is not a business, it's a way of life."

Mr. Ferri expects his strawberries will be ready to pick by June 15. The recent warm weather has speeded things up, he says. He has been watering his strawberries frequently to keep them cooler in the hotter weather. Canadian strawberries, Mr. Ferri says, are juicier and sweeter than their more common California cousins. The California berries often found in most supermarkets are drier, Mr. Ferri says.

Because Canadian berries are juicier they won't last as long as California berries, says Mr. Ferri. That's why supermarkets tend to go with the drier berries, he says.

Local strawberry farmers sell picked berries to roadside markets for approximately \$1.15 a pound, he

says: "you see better berries for sale at these roadside markets because they got them directly from farmers," he says.

People like fresh berries, he maintains. "They're like fish and chips. When you eat them at the store they're great. Bring them home and after an hour they taste like rubber," he says of the fries.

Most of the people who pick strawberries at his farm are from Toronto, and tend to be middle aged with a family, Mr. Ferri says.

Many are also ethnic minority groups he says. "If it wasn't for them we'd be out of business," he says.

Families of minorities will spend money on food while others will go to a Blue Jay game and spend money on beer, he says.

He believes married couples with families are usually more quality-conscious about their food. That's why picking strawberries is more popular with that age group, he

Getting the best from rows of red berries

Pick-your-own berries go for approximately 65 cents a pound at the Al Ferri Farm.

Most people leave the farm with between 12-15 pounds of the little red fruit, Mr. Ferri says.

It costs Mr. Ferri about 30 cents a quart to pick the strawberries himself and those costs are passed on at supermarket chains, he says. Because no Canadians want to work at picking strawberries for the wages offered, Mr. Ferri flies workers up from Trinidad for the picking season and houses them on his farm.

One reason there are so many strawberry farms west of Toronto (there are 41 listed in the 1987 Pick-Your-Own manual issued by the Provincial government) is because soil close to Lake Ontario is good quality, Mr. Ferri says.

But the main reason strawberry farmers crowd the region is the access to huge markets. Toronto is just down the road providing over two million potential buyers, he says.

Berries harvested this June were planted in May of 1986. They are sprayed and groomed all year, he says. In the winter the strawberries are covered with layers of straw to protect them from freezing.

In contrast, California berries are planted in October and harvested in February, he says.

For would-be berry pickers a weekly "Pick-Your-Own" report is available throughout the growing season, beginning June 4. The report covers produce availability in areas from London to Oshawa. Weekly information is available 24 hours a day by dialing 924-8254. The information is updated every Thursday at 3:30 p.m.

Dessert-lovers flood the fields

Veterans of the strawberry picking trade will need little advice on how best to go about the business of selecting nature's finest. But rookie pickers anxious to attack the rows of red berries may need some tips.

Always check that a farm is open for business and that strawberries are available. Since harvest dates and yields are subject to weather conditions and crops can be picked out, sufficient supplies may not yet be available.

Plan to head out to the strawberry farm early to get the best selection and beat the heat. If a long day is planned, take a hat to shield you from the sun. Also crucial are boots or even mats for kneeling in the fields.

It also helps to wear comfortable clothing to make bending and stretching easier.

Picking containers may be available at some farms, or you may be required to bring your own. Small, shallow boxes are best because they prevent tender berries at the bottom of the basket from being damaged. It doesn't pay to take a deep basket only to find out when you get home all your hard sought-after berries at the bottom have had the juice squeezed out of them.

Once you've eyed the perfect berry it is suggested the best way to make it your very own is to pinch the stem with your fingernail, just above the

berry to free it. Pulling the strawberries from the bush bruises them. Once you've got that berry in your paws don't yank the hull off. The hull preserves and locks in the berry's natural moisture.

When you are storing strawberries, separate any damaged berries as soon as possible and use them immediately in recipes where appearance doesn't matter. Strawberries will keep for up to three days if refrigerated with the hulls intact, in a single layer. It's also best to leave them unwashed and uncovered or loosely covered with wax paper to prevent mould.

When you are ready to use the strawberries, gently rinse them under cold running water with the hulls attached. Berries will absorb water and lose their flavor if they are allowed to soak.

Preserve strawberries without sugar by placing washed and hulled berries in a single layer on shallow trays and freezing until they are firm - about 35 minutes. Package frozen berries in freezer containers and date them before putting them back in the freezer.

To preserve strawberries with sugar (helps to maintain flavor and texture) add 1/2 a cup (125 ml) sugar to four cups (1 litre) of whole washed and hulled strawberries.

17th century mystique of strawberry patches

By BRIAN MacLEOD
Herald Staff

The popularity of pick-your-own strawberries in the 1980's may have levelled off, but the value of strawberries at the pick-your-own level was in excess of \$9 million in Ontario last year. That means big business for Ontario growers.

Why the popularity?

It could be the juicy sweet taste strawberries in the province have become famous for. It could be the cheaper prices at the pick-your-own market that encourages strawberry lovers. It could even be that one cup of strawberries, 250 ml, contains only 58 calories and plentiful amounts of vitamin C and Thiamin.

Whatever the reason for the popularity of strawberries in the 80's, the diminutive red berry really has quite a history.

Elegance has always surrounded the mystique of the strawberry. As far back as the 17th century strawberries were brought only to tables of royalty. In Elizabethan times, these berries were saved exclusively for special dinners.

The natural red beauty of the strawberry that attracts nature enthusiasts today actually repelled the Ancient Greeks. All red foods were taboo to them and many Greeks believed the strawberry possessed supernatural powers.

In contrast, Calo, a senator in Rome circa 200 B.C., loved strawberries more than any other cuisine. He liked them soaked in wine or sprinkled with herbs and spices some 2,100 years later, Auguste Escottier listed no less than 42 different ways to serve strawberries in his work, *Ma Cuisine*.

Strawberries are stubborn little things. Different varieties of wild strawberries grow in such diverse climates as India and Lapland (northern Scandinavia).

Like many other foods, strawberries have been connected with superstitions. To dream of strawberries is considered a good omen. A man who does so will be blessed with a sweet-tempered wife who will bear him many sons.

Bavarian peasants believe that elves are fond of strawberries. To

appease the fairy folk and ensure prosperous livestock, the countrymen tie baskets of wild strawberries to the horns of their cattle.

Even the leaves of the strawberry plant itself have been thought by some to hold special properties. At one time, strawberry leaves were considered an effective defense against goblins and other nocturnal predators.

At various times in its history the strawberry was thought to cure many different ills, from shortness of breath, to eczema to snake bites. The leaves of the strawberry have always been appreciated as a beauty aide but Madame Tallien, one of Marie Antoinette's ladies-in-waiting, went one step further. She liked to bathe in strawberry and raspberry juice, then was sponged down with milk and perfumes. She liked the pink tinge the fruit juices left on her skin.

The largest strawberry shortcake in the world is baked for the annual Strawberry Festival in Lebanon, Oregon. The creation towers over 12 feet (4 metres) and a two-man saw is used to cut it.

In 1534, Jacques Cartier recorded in his diary that he had seen "vast patches of strawberries along the great river (the St. Lawrence) and in the woods."



VERY BERRY-Glen Dexter, the Head Chef of the Herigate Inn in Milton displays one of his creations - a chocolate meringue tarte at a strawberry celebration at Springridge Farm in Milton June 10. Strawberry season has arrived at most farms across southern Ontario and the pick-your-own business has mushroomed into the major harvesting method for strawberries in Ontario. But strawberry lovers have to hurry it they want to get in on the goods. The season in Ontario lasts only a few weeks. (Herald photo by Brian MacLeod)

Try a tasty recipe

Strawberry Rhubarb Conserve
3 pints strawberries
1 orange, washed
2 cups finely chopped rhubarb
1 cup raisins
1/4 cup lemon juice
Sugar
1 cup coarsely chopped pecans, optional

• Fill boiling water canner with hot water. Place 8 clean half-pint (250 mL) mason jars in canner over high heat.

• Rinse strawberries in cold water 3 times to clean thoroughly. Drain; pat dry; remove caps. Cut strawberries in half. Quarter unpeeled orange; chop finely by hand or in food processor.

• Recording the number of cups, measure strawberries, orange, rhubarb, raisins and lemon juice into a large heavy saucepan. Stir in 1/4 cup sugar for each cup fruit.

• Bring mixture to a boil, stirring to prevent sticking. Continue boiling uncovered, stirring occasionally, until mixture is thick (mounds on a spoon) - 30 to 45 minutes.

• Place Bernardin Snap Lids in boiling water; boil 5 minutes to soften sealing compound.

• If using nuts, stir them into thickened fruit mixture; boil 1 minute longer. Remove from heat.

• Ladle conserve into a hot sterilized jar to within 1/4 inch of top rim (head space). Remove air bubbles by sliding rubber spatula between glass

and food; readjust head space to 1/4 inch. Wipe jar rim, removing any stickiness. Center Snap Lid on jar; apply screw band just until fingertight. Place jar in canner. Repeat for remaining conserve.

• Cover canner; return water to boil; process 10 minutes. Remove jars. Cool 24 hours. Check jar seal. (Sealed lids curve downward in center.) Clean screw band; remove, if desired. Wipe jars, label and store in a cool, dark place.

Makes 8 cups conserve.

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