

## Peaches occupy a sweet slice of history

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Summer is slowly drawing to an end. I measure the season's progress by the fruit varieties. The last couple of weeks, my family enjoyed Suisun Valley Fay Elberta peaches for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; fresh, baked, poached and any other way possible.

Every year, it is a challenge to find local roadside stands that sell freshly picked Fay Elbertas by the box during the early August season.

The Fay Elberta is a delicate peach with beautiful odor and intense flavor that bruises easily. This makes it unsuitable for supermarket sales. Like the nearly vanished Blenheim apricot, to me the Fay Elberta symbolizes Solano County's rich agricultural history.

Peach trees are a member of the rose family and are believed to be native to China. The trees are relatively short-lived, on average just up to 30 years. The productive lifespan for a tree in a commercial orchard is usually seven to nine years. Today, nearly 300 varieties are grown in the two major growing areas - California and South Carolina.

Solano County's first Anglo-American settler, John Wolfskill, came to the area in 1842. He is reputed to have brought grapes, peaches and other fruit trees from Southern California. He generously shared tree spurs and his horticultural knowledge with other local settlers.

The Solano County Herald, on Aug. 23, 1856, said about his efforts: "We are indebted to Messrs. Wolskill (sic) of the Putah (creek), for some of the finest specimens of fruit we have seen for many a long day. Grapes, peaches, pears and figs are raised by them in abundance, and all of the finest quality. No pains are spared by Mr. Wolfskill in the culture of his fruit, and we are glad that his labor has been so amply rewarded. We hope to see the day that our valleys, in this vicinity, will be one great fruit garden; and to this end, none have contributed more zealously than these pioneers of the fruit business."

During the 1850s and 1860s, local farmers concentrated their efforts on growing grapes, both for wine and as fresh fruit.

Early orchards were established mostly for home use. Some of the fresh fruit may have

found its way to local markets and in the Bay Area where it could command premium prices. Transportation methods were unreliable, shipped by boat out of Suisun and shaken on a horse-drawn carriage overland.

The fall of wheat prices, followed by the arrival of the railroad in 1869, challenged local farmers to find new crops; local soils and climate conditions offered the potential to cultivate stone fruit such as cherries, apricots, peaches, nectarines and plums on a large scale.

Fifteen years after lauding John Wolfskill's early efforts, local farmers had established the area's reputation as the first region in the state to be able to ship fresh fruit early. This is an incredibly fast development, considering that it takes newly installed orchards several years before they become productive.

On June 22, 1871, the Weekly Solano Republican was able to write: "Pleasant Valley, situated in the northern portion of this county, is generally noted for sending the first fruit to market in the state. Solano will again take the lead in fruit shipments this year. M. R. Miller of Pleasant Valley has just completed arrangements for the sending of fruit eastward as far as Denver. He will immediately commence forwarding 100 boxes a day. By express to that point it can be sent at the low rate of thirty cents per box, while it costs twenty cents to ship to San Francisco. Mr. Miller has an orchard and vineyard of 100 acres, which he expects will yield larger this year than ever before. A force of men will constantly be employed in the gathering and packing."

To facilitate shipments, Ansel W. Putnam constructed a road from Pleasants Valley to the embarcadero of Suisun.

During the decade of the 1870s, orchard acreage rapidly increased in the valleys, at the entrance of the various canyons, and up the hills; many of these locations provided microclimates that helped ripen fruit earlier than anywhere else in the state. The Vacaville Early Fruit District or Vacaville Fruit Belt quickly gained fame for the freshness and high quality of its products.

Various peach varieties produced fruit from May to October. Growers continually experimented with the creation of new varieties that improved flavor, ripening date or better shipping qualities. Among the local varieties developed were the Buck peach by L. W. Buck of Vaca Valley; the Decker variety by Sol Decker of Pleasants Valley; the Early Imperial by W. W. Smith of Vaca Valley; the Gate's Cling and the Grover Cleveland peaches by J. W. Gates of Vaca Valley; the McKevitt Cling by M. R. Miller of Pleasants Valley; the Lovall, Muir and Thissell varieties by G. W. Thissell of Pleasants Valley; and the Ulatis peach by an unknown farmer.

Other varieties never grew to commercial status, but were cherished by their owners for their delicate flesh and wonderful flavor. Some peach varieties were so fragile that they had to be picked and taken out of the orchard in a bucket of water.

Over the next few decades, fresh and dried fruit commerce, including peaches, shaped the Vacaville and Suisun Valley communities. Cooperatives, Growers and Shippers Association formed to ensure that their members had easy access to the markets across the United States.

Generations of men, women and children worked in the orchards during the summer months, picking the fresh fruit, packing it in specially made boxes or cutting the fruit to dry in the sun or in a dehydrator.

Picking peaches was and is dirty work. The fruit's fuzz will cling to the picker, itching unbearably on the skin. Pickers often dress in long sleeve shirts and hooded jackets, sweltering in the hot summer sun while trying to escape the fuzz. Older varieties such as the Fay Elberta tend to be even fuzzier than today's modern peach varieties.

Once picked, the peaches were brought to the packing sheds, where helping hands, family members, friends and contract workers, sorted the fruit by size.

Women and children spent the whole summer at cutting tables, cutting fruit with a knife, taking out the stone, and laying the cut fruit on drying trays. They were paid by the box. When finished with their box, they would holler to get a new one brought to their station and to have their ticket punched. Due to the size of peaches, it took a lot less time to cut a box. Consequently the pay for peach boxes was less per box than that for apricots or prunes. At the end of the day, the punches were tallied up for payment.

Knives were shaped differently for each fruit type, and sometimes cutters prized their own home-constructed knife. Nonetheless, cuts and nicks were common and a can with Band-Aids was never far from the tables.

If dried, peaches were mostly sun-dried. A dry yard laid out with hundreds of trays quickly looked like a golden sea of sunshine. Some dry yards were laid out on a hillside to catch more sun rays, turning the landscape deep orange, golden yellow or dark purple based on the fruit.

Canning was another way to preserve a crop of peaches. This was done at home for the family's own consumption. Diaries often record the number of cans "put up" in a day. Fay Elberta peaches were one of the preferred canning peaches.

Roy Mason recalled how he would bring in Fay

Elbertas freshly picked from their orchard early in the morning. His mother was waiting with sterilized jars, and by 8 a.m. the peaches would be in the jar. "In December and January, when you would eat them, they tasted better than the fresh picked fruit," he remembered.

Several commercial canneries operated in the area, too, well into the 1940s and 1950s, when the fresh fruit industry finally declined. Most were small family operations, although several large companies also established themselves in the area.

Today, peaches are still grown commercially in Solano County. Varieties have changed to accommodate current consumer wishes, such as for sweet white peach varieties. Fortunately, there are also local growers with smaller orchards that preserve older varieties such as the Fay Elberta.

For this year, the Fay Elberta season is finished. It will take roughly 345 days until early August 2007 before they will be ripe again, giving us another bite into a piece of local history.

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