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Napkin Notes

Pick Me a Pixie: Foods that are sweet, local and human

By Clark Wolf

Splitting his time between Guerneville and Manhattan, acclaimed consultant Clark Wolf graces these pages with an occasional diatribe from a periodic local.

It's not difficult to be cranky with Whole Foods, especially in Sebastopol. Don't get me wrong, I think the big WF has made major contributions to food quality and choice in lots of places. Like the Starbucks in the Cincinnati Airport, it's simply better than what was there before.

In Manhattan, where we spend clumps of time, they knocked it out of the box, putting on the best grocery extravaganza to hit town in 30 years. And in Las Vegas? Oh, My. God. Even without Siegfried wandering around the aisles in search of Roy, it's a surreal oasis in a sandy sea of off-the-Strip malls.

But on Highway 116, the food shop formerly known as Food for Thought (6910 McKinley, Sebastopol; 707.829.9801) has lost significant charm since corporate organics pulled into the lot across from one of my favorite farmers markets anywhere. For starters, there's now row after trim row of what it proudly calls "conventional" produce. Honey, for thousands of years, what we call organic was conventional. This, my little pigeons, is industrial, overirrigated and gently buffed mass-produced fruits and veggies, at organics-adjacent prices.

Then there are those few special treats--a chicken quesadilla, Sonoma chicken salad, a deluxe nut and raisin mix, certain French clay soaps, co-operatively produced natural pork products (all strong reasons for a special stop)--that now seem to be in painfully slow occasional rotation or have disappeared altogether. And the local cheese selection has melted plenty.

But silver lining rocks on the Gravenstein way. This quality, diversity and integrity dip has presented opportunities embraced by other local classics.

Fiesta Market (550 Hwy. 116 N., Sebastopol; 707.823.9735), that brilliantly updated archetypically postwar--you know, the one we felt mostly good about--1950s-style community grocery store has really stepped up. The organics seem to be growing. The cheese section is impressive. The fish department is among the first to sport the Monterey Aquarium's straightforward species viability markers. They proffer quite a selection of natural meats. All without pretense and mixed in with loads of little treasures. You can actually shop those aisles and end up with wholesome, tasty food.

Down the way, Andy's Produce (1691 Hwy. 116 N., Sebastopol; 707.823.8661) seemed to be much more "just that" than when we started visiting regularly about eight years ago. Good stuff, out front and plenty that's local.

Then there's the tangerine factor. Pixies, to be exact. Those sweet little orbs from Ojai became all the rage, but mostly what you find has lumpy, thick skin and a decidedly pleasant but significantly lower brix (sugar level) than the most stellar version. That one, the thin skinned, candy-sweet little babies grown organically on just two and a half farms (hey, it's a process) can be found in just a few places.

I had my first as one of a perfect trio at the end of a perfect meal, upstairs at the Café at Chez Panisse. Perfect. The next time was at Buona Terra Farm in Ojai (one of the two full growers) with an intense and passionate Sicilian-American farmer called Camille Sears. A UC Davis-trained meteorologist, she went back to where she'd grown up (Ojai) and acquired an abandoned orange grove where she now raises brilliant Pixies, myriad other rare and wondrous citrus, French melons, figs, herbs and assorted stellar whatnot.

But mostly I splurge on bags of Pixies bought right down the road from our Guernewood



Brix: Best cultivated in Ojai, the Pixie tangerine is thin-skinned, difficult to grow and delicious.

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I visit the dear and honest Food for Humans (the name, a benign dig at that former Sebastopol shop moniker) where I get so much of what I love, from lovely people who actually care about every morsel, every farmer and every person who walks in the door.

So buy local. Buy sweet. Buy human.

Clark Wolf is the president of the Clark Wolf Company, specializing in food, restaurant and hospitality consulting.

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