

# Food and passion at the Farmers' Market

## The fruit lady, the baker, and the fromagier

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Published May 22, 2008

It begins the night before.

On a small fruit farm in the Central Valley, a farmer has finished the day's picking. He and his small crew have combed his 200 acres and handpicked only the most perfectly ripened fruit. Now they load a truck with couple dozen varieties of fruit – navel oranges, cherries, tangerines, tangelos, apples, pears, mandarins, apricots – and by early the next morning this multi-colored fresh cargo will arrive into the care of a woman whose outsized personality and passionate fruit advocacy have made her well-known at local farmers' markets simply as "the Fruit Lady."

At a small bakery in West Los Angeles, a weary looking French baker supervises his small crew of apprentices. It's the middle of the night, and more than a dozen different kinds of bread are in various stages of preparation, including baguettes, fresh-fruit pastries, rye walnut-raisin bread, an old-fashioned French country loaf that doesn't use yeast and takes 18 hours to raise, and a multi-grain wheat bread that the baker's father baked for his entire village in the north of France more than 50 years ago.

Shortly before dawn, a tall Frenchman wearing a leather cowboy hat arrives at his daily pre-market rendezvous. He is a man whose profession is honored in his homeland, but little known in America. He is a roving "fromagier," a specialist in cheeses and how they should be paired, prepared, or otherwise heartily indulged. He is also an "affineur," a master trained in the delicate art of tending to cheese. He has a large collection of cheeses that he cares for, and each morning at 5:30 a.m. he can be found brushing, cleaning, and tasting his products, assessing their quality, ripeness, and readiness for market. On this morning, he has a special treat. He has finally obtained a cheese that he has been trying to import for six years – an all-purpose, low fat cream cheese known as Cancoillotte. It is rarely available anywhere in the United States and nowhere else in California. It is a key addition to the fromagier's arsenal – which includes several dozen cheeses – because the French cowboy has an urgent truth he has come to America to deliver: his is a sort of culinary gospel, instructions in living a better and more healthful life through the proper enjoyment of cheese.

Later on this particular morning, all three of these vendors will arrive at the Hermosa Beach Farmers' Market. They will join an eclectic assortment of vendors whose stalls offer a veritable cornucopia of fresh produce and assorted delicacies: marinated Korean cabbage, Scottish scones, fresh Greek feta cheese, hummus, and pita bread, Alaskan salmon, luscious strawberries, bags of specialty lettuces and just about every other kind of vegetable grown under the abundant California sun.

The beach cities are rich in farmer's markets (see related stories). In fact, local residents could easily subsist on farmers' markets alone: on Tuesday afternoon, Manhattan Beach's new market has grown into a vibrant addition; on Thursday morning, Redondo Beach's market offers the most beautiful setting, overlooking the ocean at its perch near Veteran's Park; on Thursday afternoon and early evening, El Segundo's festive market takes care of the city's booming nine to five crowd; on Fridays the faithful gather in Hermosa, and on both Tuesday and Saturday mornings the biggest local market of them all takes place in Torrance.

It's no coincidence that many of the vendors these markets hail from other countries. In most of the world, open air markets and specialty stores (such as the "fish mongers" and "cheese mongers" in many European countries) are more prevalent than in the United States, where the American invention of the "supermarket" crowded out many such ways of food selling – and consuming – over the course of the last century. America's agriculture has become dominantly corporate and our diet quite literally industrialized. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis, 90 percent of the money Americans spend on food is for processed foods. Our food rarely comes to us without processing that includes an array of more than 3,000 commonly used additives, flavorings, and preservatives.



But the nation's food culture is slowly changing, and farmers' markets are at the forefront of that change. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, there were 4,385 farmers markets in the United States in 2006, a seven percent from 2005 and a 1,190 percent increase from 1970 (when there were only 315). These markets offer more purely "whole foods" than any grocery store. The movement is environmental in nature – the food is fresher, increasingly produced with non-chemical, organic practices, and because of its more local origin, generates a lower "carbon footprint" in its journey to your plate.

But there is something much more fundamental going on. To the fruit lady, the baker, and the fromagier – and to most people throughout most human history – food has always been a very personal thing.

### **The fruit lady and the farmer**

It's a hot September day in the Central Valley. Secil Atalay has just driven 200 miles from Los Angeles, and as she turns down the fruit tree lined lane that leads into Arnett Farms, she is overcome with joy.

"Ah! Oranges! So beautiful!" she exclaims.

Atalay has come to see her boss, farmer Scott Arnett, for whom she has sold fruit at farmer's markets throughout the LA area for seven years. Although she works 13 to 17 hour days at six markets each week, Atalay still finds time to make a pilgrimage up to the farm at least once a month – on her day off.

"If I didn't know where it came from and how it was grown, if I didn't see this growing on the tree, I couldn't sell it," Atalay said. "It's not like a product you get from a manufacturer and then sell it... You've got to see it growing. You have to feel connected to it."

Few farmers are as connected to their product as Arnett. His family has owned this farm since 1903, but only since he took over a couple of decades ago did the farm blossom into a full-fledged fruit farm. Arnett grows more than 200 varieties of fruit, including all varieties of stone fruits, cherries, berries, apples, persimmons and every kind of citrus imaginable. In the last decade, genetic crossing quickly created hundreds of new combinations – plums and apricots combined to create pluats, for example, while many different seasonal varieties for every specific fruit have also been newly bred.

Arnett has been at the cutting edge of this prodigious new fruit world. Unlike most of the farms involved in this experimentation, which tend to be large and decidedly corporate, Arnett and his crew of about a half-dozen farm hands are learning the new fruits close-up and intimately. Arnett's 200 acres are his laboratory: he knows which soil is sandiest, which fruit thrives best where and when. Arnett, who is also an experienced bee-keeper, knows a thing or two about pollinations, and every day he learns more. He is constantly working on his own cross-pollinations – sometimes just by putting the blossoms of one fruit near other fruit trees, other times grafting branches onto different trees and seeing what results.

"Sometimes they are new and I don't know exactly what they are like," he said. "But the birds like them."

He has, for example, 19 varieties of apricots and "apriums" alone, and he always reserves part of the farm for ongoing experimentations with five to seven new fruits. And as fruit growing season has expanded to include more year-round growing, Arnett has become particularly vigilant during the winter. He has four wind machines he moves around the farm to keep the trees warm. His is a combination of passion, devotion, extremely particular knowledge and sheer grit that few people in any endeavor possess.

"I have never met anybody actually who loves what he does as he does," Atalay said. "Are you kidding me? That guy, in the winter, when it is freezing season, he will stay up all night long checking the wind machines and going around watching the trees. I mean, he looks after that ranch like no one else would. Each and every tree is taken care of."

Arnett has also found the perfect ambassador for his farm in Secil Atalay. Hers is a difficult job, with long hours and uncertain pay – depending on the seasons and the verisimilitudes of her customers – but Atalay is not a fruit vendor out of a lack of something better to do. Atalay, a native of Istanbul, Turkey, has likewise been engaged in a lifelong love affair with fruit.

Atalay is a force of nature. She grew up middle class in Istanbul – the daughter of a policeman, who died when she was only four – but worked so hard at school that she was able to attend an elite private high school on scholarship. Her classmates were wealthy; some occasionally arrived at school on helicopters. During the summer months, when they would vacation all over Europe and Africa and even America, she would go to her grandmother's home in the rural area near Ankara.

This was fine by Secil: her grandmother, and many of her neighbors, grew fruit trees.

"I remember after school in spring I would take my bike and ride to – well we don't really call them ranches, they are small – but people have these big yards. I would pick apricots and plums, because I was curious," she recalled. "I got caught once stealing fruit, and I told the person, 'My sister is pregnant and she is craving it! I am so sorry!' I don't know how I thought

of that. I was probably ten or eleven. But I lied!”

Her mother, Nebahat, noticed the zest with which her daughter ate fruit. She frequently joked, “I am going to have to give you to a produce man!” But Atalay was not entirely unusual in her passion for fruit. While American kids are probably more likely to snack on fruit-flavored candy, fruit was an integral part of the daily diet for everyone in Turkey. Her mother set out a large bowl of fruit for the family every night a couple hours after dinner.

“I mean a big bowl,” Atalay said. “I am not talking about a salad bowl, but a big bowl of fruit would come, and everybody would have a little plate and they would peel or eat whole or whatever. Fruit was a course for us at night. In the morning you eat fruit, during the day you eat fruit...Fruit is a big part of our diet in Turkey.”

After high school, Atalay moved to London, where she worked as an au-pair before being accepted by the London School of Economics. Eventually, she made it to America, where she had always sensed she would one day live. Her academic background was in accounting and finance, but she was inevitably drawn to her real passion: fruit.

To watch Atalay work her stand is to see someone fully in her element. She seems to recall every detail about her customers – who has a new child, a sick husband, or an impending wedding, who surfs, who writes, and what kind of fruit any one of her many regulars prefers (she even recalled the fruit this reporter first purchased five years ago: “You liked white-fleshed fruits – white nectarines,” she said).

“After all these years, it’s funny, you see people dating, and then they get married, and then they get pregnant and have a baby, and the baby is walking now,” Atalay said. “It really happens. You see that happening. It kind of matches the fruit, in a way: it’s a cycle.”

She also carefully tends to the needs of her customers. Several of her more elderly regulars have received carts from Atalay so they don’t have to carry the fruit back to their cars or homes, and if she doesn’t have a fruit in season that they like, she’ll hunt it down at another market.

“She takes care of me,” said one customer, a little grey-haired woman named Helen. “She’s always going out of her way.”

But perhaps to really see “the Fruit Lady” in her element is to watch her walk through a grove of citrus trees out at Arnett farms, her usually somewhat boisterous demeanor calmed by awe.

“I sometimes think it is the most amazing thing there is,” Atalay said, in a half-whisper, gazing around at all the trees. Later, she amplified this thought. “It’s not just the fruit. It is the idea of a blossom turning into that fruit. You know what I mean? It is amazing to me to see something grow and shape. It’s like some people have that passion for a baby. I just think, in a way, it is the most amazing thing.”

### **The baker’s tale**

Tucked away in the uppermost corner of northeast France is a little 10th century village – complete with a high tower and a moat – that bears the name Bergues. In the nearby countryside in the latter half of the last century lived a farmer named Claude Warnier. In addition to tending his patch of earth, Claude became well-known locally for his bread. He was the village baker.

The baker’s son, Thierry, left for Paris when he was a young man. He worked in several restaurants and bakeries, following a tradition in which young chefs patiently learn culinary traditions from their elders. By the time he was 30, Warnier opened his own bakery, The Parisian. His baked goods were well-loved in a city that knows how to love food perhaps better than any city in the world, and eventually he went to work for the royal family at the Palace of Monaco in the late 1970s.

The same pastries that Princess Grace enjoyed are now available at 13 farmers’ markets throughout the Los Angeles area. And the very same bread that Warnier’s father baked for his village, a hearty five-grain loaf, is among the dozen or so breads that Thierry bakes for his markets.

Warnier is a beloved fixture at the Hermosa Beach market. Although the market doesn’t officially begin until noon, his regulars can frequently be found rushing to his stand an hour early just to be certain that their weekends will include a certain French delicacy, such as his cream cheese pastry (which somehow manages to be indescribably rich yet airy at the same time), the croissant he fills with dark chocolate (he uses only high-end chocolate, such as Cote D’Or, a famed Belgian brand), his ethereally crisp apple turnovers or any his fruit pastries (which use only fresh fruit – “Never frozen!” he exclaims – and regularly include pear, peach, apple, and a revolving cast of other seasonal fruits, such as raspberry and most recently cherry).

The baker is a spindly man with kindly eyes and an air of perpetual exhaustion. He speaks somewhat haltingly in English but gesticulates passionately when speaking French. He says the reason he endures the long hours – his workdays frequently begin in the very wee hours and don’t end until the early evening – is much the same as when he left his village and headed for the bakeries of Paris.

“I love the bread!” he said.

Twenty years ago, Warnier tried to quit baking professionally. After a brief time he found that he could not live any other way. “I tried to do something else, but came back to the food...because I need to do this,” he said.

A dozen years ago, he arrived in the United States with little but his recipes and a notion that Americans might like to try some genuine French baked goods. His early reconnaissance of American grocery stores left him somewhat baffled – there were aisles and aisles of everything, but nary a good loaf of bread to be found.

“You can buy a lot of things that are very good, but only the bread is not good,” he said.

He didn’t have the resources to open a storefront bakery, so instead he launched his farmer’s market enterprise. He called it La Boulangerie, which means simply “The Bakery.” He has worked with a series of partners over the years – currently Shirley Williams, who has brought several Caribbean slow-baking techniques, such as baking some loafs at the front of the oven with the door open and thereby allowing the bread to bake for five to six hours to better retain its natural flavor and nutrients.

Many of Warnier’s methods are marked by such unhurriedness. His plain French old country bread – le pain de champagne – is based on a two-century old recipe that uses no yeast and so takes 18 hours to rise before it is baked. This bread stands in contrast to industrially produced bread in another important way. A look at the label of a store-bought loaf lists ingredients that typically include high fructose corn syrup, wheat gluten, molasses, soybean oil, salt, sugar, sweet dairy whey, butter, corn starch, honey, calcium sulfate, dough conditioners such as dicalcium phosphate, calcium dioxide, sodium stearoyl lactylate, beta carotene for color and calcium propionate to retain freshness (the label this reporter looked at also included “natural flavor” as one of its ingredients).

The baker’s country loaf also has a label. It lists whole wheat flour, water, and salt. His rye walnut-raisin consists of rye flour, walnuts, raisins, yeast, salt and water. All his breads are similarly straightforward. The taste comes from simple ingredients and the use of time-tested, often ancient methods, not some sugary concoction engineered to soothe your palate while delivering a prescribed amount of niacin and iron (and no trans fats, of course).

His regular breads include Ciabatta Provencal, which lightly toasted might make the best sandwiches on Earth, as well as olive and rosemary breads and little “brioche,” or milk-bread rolls. There are frequently other breads, as well; last week, for instance, he made a rustic circular loaf called a Couronne that quite literally was able to keep two small households fully breaded for a week. His baguettes – which it must be said vary week to week from a crusty French sublimity to occasional doughy plainness, apparently depending on the progress of one of his eight apprentices – are the only bread that uses white flour.

Warnier says that what he loves about bread-making is the care and intricacy that goes into each loaf. When he was learning to bake in France, every oven varied, depending on the stone that existed in the surrounding countryside that would inevitably be used in the ovens. These days, he is careful about which breads go to which markets – Hermosa Beach, he notes, has more humidity in the air than Los Angeles and requires a very particular baking touch.

“I think it is an art, like painting,” he said. “It is the way I make art.”

### **The evangelist of cheese**

A hand-written sign above Laurent Bonjour’s stand – a pick-up truck equipped with a cooler that opens to display 60 very particular cheeses – gives customers an idea of the French Cowboy’s mission in life. It reads: “Wake Up and Smell the Cheese.”

The play on words is a joke, but Bonjour’s intent is quite serious. His attitude is this: he has the truth, and he is here to deliver it. Bonjour has an encyclopedic knowledge of cheese. He can describe in beloved detail the flavor and texture of each cheese as well as the story of its origin – a blue cheese called Valencay, for example, is shaped like a pyramid with its top chopped off because Napoleon returned from his unsuccessful Egyptian military campaign and was offended by its full shape.

“He stepped on French soil and took his sword and cut it,” Bonjour said. “So now this cheese is shaped like this...Because he had a bad trip.”

The myths Bonjour is more concerned with, however, are those surrounding what he believes are Americans’ misperceptions about cheese and its alleged contributions to ill-health. On the contrary, Bonjour argues that cheese contributes to good health. At every market he goes to, Bonjour erects fold-out sign in front of his stand that on one side describes all 60 of his cheeses and on the other seeks to convey his message of healthful cheese-eating. “Eating fat will not make you fat,” the sign reads at top. “...Eat quality, not quantity.”

Much of what Bonjour says is based on a newly evolving body of scientific evidence that delineates “good fat” from “bad fat” – the heart of the so-called “French Paradox” that has shown the French people to have a relatively low incidence of heart disease and obesity despite a diet rich in buttery sauces, pastries, and cheese. A University of Pennsylvania study has shown that not only are French serving sizes significantly smaller (25 percent on average), but their fat intake largely consists of natural ‘saturated fats’ (such as those found in cheese) that are easily metabolized by the human body. Americans, on the other hand, gobble down larger servings and eat gobs of processed foods rich hydrogenated and “trans fats.” Interestingly, Americans also eat faster – the study showed that even at a McDonald’s, the French slow down and take 22 minutes eating their fast food, whereas Americans take 14 minutes.

Bonjour says that cheese helps keep French people more lean because a small slice provides a full sensory experience while doing more to satisfy hunger than most foods. “Savor,” says Bonjour. “Don’t stuff.”

No food is perhaps more savored in France than cheese, washed down with just the right wine. Bonjour is from an area that even within his native land is famed for its cheeses. His hometown is Annecy, a small city in the Haute-Savoie region, an area on the eastern slope of the Alps bordering both Switzerland and Italy. Where Bonjour is from, cheese is a way of life.

“We have cheese every day,” he said. “At the end of each meal – when you sit at the table, you put cheese on the table, with breakfast, with lunch, with dinner. And you don’t have only one cheese, or two cheeses, because everybody is different. When I grew up in France, every day we had a platter, with fruit and cheese, different meats....So when you put the plate on the table, you have a choice: you can have a little bit of each, or you can have only one. It depends on your mood.”

Among Bonjour’s cheeses are several from this area, including Raclette, widely considered the best melted cheese in the world (served as a full meal with potatoes and small pickled cucumbers) and Reblochon, a cave-aged cheese so creamy it makes Brie look firm by comparison (also a cheese with a tale: in the Middle-Ages, farmers in used to pay their taxes with part of their milk production, and so at tax-collecting time they did not fully milk their cows – after tax officers left the area, the farmers were left with much richer milk, and thus was born Reblochon). Then there is Tomme de Savoie, an amazing raw cow’s milk cheese that has a sweet, grassy taste that somehow pairs equally well with a hearty red wine or a dry chardonnay.

Another cheese he once obtained from his home is one of his proudest accomplishments as an “affineur”: a goat’s cheese only produced by four family farms in the Aravais Mountains – “two valleys east of Annecy,” he says – that is called “Persillé des Aravis.” The cheese looks like “dried soil” on the inside and according to Bonjour “when you eat a bite, I guarantee you that one hour later, when you close your mouth...you will still have the taste of this cheese...Even in France it is very hard to find it, even in my own town.” This was an extreme example, but it is the kind of cheese Bonjour specializes in – he tries to find those still made on small farms whenever possible.

“Every product has to pass my quality control,” Bonjour said. “If I don’t like it, I don’t get it. There are some cheeses, like Raclette or Morbier, that are made by different companies. I chose this one because it is still made at a farm. The ones made at a factory taste greasy, while these ones are light.”

Bonjour came to America in 1992 simply because he sought to make a big change in his life. He was 28, and had run a catering company in France, so he naturally fell into working in restaurants in the U.S. Eventually, he began working with as a fromagier with a cheese shop but eventually decided to out on his own. Drawing on his catering experience, he rigged up a truck and went roving with cheese.

Perhaps the single most important aspect Bonjour tries to bring to his customers is service. Some of his cheeses one can find elsewhere, he says, but nowhere else will you find a fromagier who will cater to your particular palate and even your health. “The satisfaction is – I don’t feel like a doctor, but I take care of a lot of people,” Bonjour said.

He recalled an experience he had with one regular customer that exemplifies the power of cheese. The man had just been to his doctor, who warned him that he was growing overweight and his cholesterol levels were getting high.

“So he comes to me,” Bonjour said. “I tell him to eat a twelfth of a pound of cheese just with wine...and in five weeks, he lost eight pounds and his cholesterol lowered. And when he went back to see his doctor for check up, his doctor said, ‘You lost eight pounds, your cholesterol level is nice...What kind of diet have you been on? He said, ‘Cheese and wine.’”

The doctor replied that was impossible. The man shook his head: “Ask my cheese guy.”

### **In the land of the taste-blind**

The great American food writer M.F.K Fisher wrote worryingly of the tendency in this country to eat as if it were just another task to be completed. She contrasted us to the French.

“In Paris the gourmets eat with a quiet deliberation, rolling each mouthful slowly toward their gullets,” she wrote. “....In Paris and in the village there is a gusto, a frank sensuous realization of food...In America, we eat, collectively, with a glum urge for food to fill us. We are as a nation taste-blind.”

The baker noticed a couple of things about American food when he first arrived. One, Americans did do one thing far better than the French: “Cookies! The homemade cookies are very good here!” But there was something else that was a little more troubling: much American food seemed to be made for hurried meals.

“In the United States, people drive a lot,” Warnier said. “So they just eat something in the car, or they eat between the normal meals. They eat all the day little things, and some companies know, so they make all these little things.”

He was right. A recent survey showed that 20 percent of all the food Americans consume is in their cars. Another study showed an even more disturbing trend – a significant percentage of obese children have been found suffering from diseases such as rickets, which are indicators of undernourishment.

The fromagier believes the cure is something fairly simple: a cultivation of deeper enjoyment of our eating.

“The difference between here and in European countries is that eating, in Europe, is a pleasure,” Bonjour said. “But here it is a necessity.”

Savor, he says, don't stuff. His greatest hero, Brillat Savarin (the man for whom, not coincidentally, the so-called “King of Cheeses” is named), in 1825 wrote one of the first and perhaps most influential food books ever written, called “The Physiology of Taste.” The book began with a series of 20 aphorisms, but the first four pretty much lay out some essential truths that a regular visit to the local farmers' market will help us all better live by: “1. The Universe is nothing without the things that live in it, and everything that lives, eats. 2. Animals feed themselves; men eat; but only wise men know the art of eating. 3. The destiny of nations depends on how they nourish themselves. 4. Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are.” ER