



THE
fruits
OF
THEIR
labor

What does it take to grow the produce we love to eat so much? We talked to farmers around the country to get the inside scoop on just what it's like out there in the fields.

Story | HALEY SHAPLEY



a BERRY TOUGH business

When you think of jobs in which you have to be ready around the clock for emergencies, produce grower probably isn't the first one that comes to mind. But when the slightest bit of precipitation falls from the sky onto Mike Clevenger's laser-leveled South Florida fields, he goes running. "Whether it be a 1-inch rain or an 8-inch rain, we literally have to be in the field and manually crank 18-inch pumps," he says. "It's the most on-call job that you will ever have in your life." While Clevenger grows more than 40 items at Farmer Mike's U Pick in Bonita Springs, Florida—including tomatoes, hot peppers, sweet onions, snapdragons and

oranges—he's particularly known for his strawberries. The weather makes growing the sweet fruit a challenging proposition, as it's difficult to keep the strawberries firm with the hot temperatures. Still, it's worth it to Clevenger—despite the on-call nature of the job. "It gets in your blood and it's all I've ever done," he says. "It's fun to see the little kids come out of the field with strawberry juice all over them." When searching for strawberries, you'd think a vibrant-colored fruit would be easy to spot, but that isn't always the case. "They hide very well under the bushes, so move the bushes to look for them," Clevenger recommends. "The redder, the better."

WHOLE WHEAT STRAWBERRY OAT BARS

Recipe from californiastrawberries.com

INGREDIENTS

1 1/4 cup oats

1 1/2 cup whole wheat pastry flour

1/3 cup sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

3/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1/2 teaspoon salt

5 tablespoon unsalted butter, cut into pieces

1 egg

3 tablespoon canola oil

1/4 cup chopped raw cashews (or other nuts)

5 cups sliced strawberries

6 tablespoon sugar

2 tablespoon cornstarch

2 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

INSTRUCTIONS

Heat oven to 375 F. Grease 9x13 baking dish.

Place oats, flour, cinnamon and salt in bowl of food processor; pulse until finely ground. Add butter and pulse until mixture forms large

crumbs. In another bowl, whisk together the egg and canola oil; add to butter mixture and blend.

Transfer 3/4 cup of the mixture to a bowl and stir in the nuts; set aside. Press remaining mixture into the bottom of the prepared pan to form a crust. In a large bowl, combine the strawberries, sugar, corn starch and lemon juice. Spread strawberry mixture evenly on top of crust. Sprinkle reserved nut mixture over top.

Bake 40 minutes. Cool; refrigerate for 30 minutes. Cut into 24 pieces.



great DATES

When Lee Anderson Sr. came back from World War I to find the bank had foreclosed on his citrus farm, he decided it was time to begin anew. So in 1919, he moved to California's Coachella Valley to start growing dates. "This was before there was air conditioning in the 120-degree summers," says great-grandson Charles Anderson, now the fourth generation to carry on the Fresh Dates by Anderson tradition. Date growing involves careful maintenance of the trees, with the busy season during harvest, from mid-August through October. The farm—which invites the public out to pick—mainly focuses on Barhi, Medjool, Zahidi and Deglet Noor varieties, although they have several others in smaller quantities. While dates have been a staple food in the Middle East for years, they're still a niche fruit here in the U.S. "I wish people were more exposed to dates," Anderson says. "They have quite a lot of health benefits. There's more potassium in a date than a banana." If you're new to dates, you may want to try Anderson's favorite, the Barhi, which you can eat before it's ripened. "They're juicy and crunchy like an apple," Anderson says. But you do have to time it right—they're only on the market for a maximum of two months a year.

CALIFORNIA DATE CHEESECAKE

Recipe from datesaregreat.com

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 graham crackers, crushed
2 tablespoons butter, melted
4 (8 ounce) packages cream cheese
1 cup diced California dates
3/4 cup milk
4 eggs
1 cup sour cream
1 tablespoon vanilla extract
1/4 cup all-purpose flour

INSTRUCTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 F. Spray a 9-inch spring form pan with non-

stick cooking spray. In a medium bowl, mix graham crackers crumbs with melted butter. Press onto bottom of spring form pan.

In a large bowl, mix cream cheese until smooth. Blend in milk, and then mix in the eggs one at a time, mixing just enough to incorporate. Mix sour cream, vanilla and flour until smooth. Pour filling into prepared crust.

Add dates to the mixture, making sure dates are spread evenly across cheesecake. Bake in preheated oven for one hour. Turn the oven off, and let cake cool in oven with the door closed for five to six hours to prevent cracking. Chill in refrigerator until serving.



CHEERS *for cherries*

farms are often passed down through families, but neither Glenn nor Judy LaCross was born into the business. After finding land in Cedar, Michigan that just happened to have cherry trees on it, Glenn began taking care of the orchard and ended up liking it—so much so that they now boast 800 acres. In the Traverse City area, known as the Cherry Capital of the World, cherries are big business—but there’s no guarantee that the growing season will go as planned. “We never know how the weather’s going to play out,” Judy LaCross says. “If we get a late spring when there’s frost, we can lose the entire crop. If it’s too cold, bees won’t pollinate the blossoms. There

are all those factors.” Most years, though, they grow plenty of cherries in many different varieties, mostly tart, which can be candied, dried, made into concentrate or transformed into maraschino cherries. “We kind of do it all,” LaCross says. “We process the cherries in almost every imaginable way.” While word has gotten out that cherries are delicious, LaCross wishes more people knew how healthy they really are. “They’ve been studied by Michigan State University and found to have antioxidants and anti-inflammatory properties,” she says. “If I cross-country ski and have stiff joints, cherry juice will alleviate that discomfort. We personally drink cherry juice every single day.” ✦

RIPE FOR THE PICKING

Even if you don't grow produce yourself, you can pretend for the day—enjoy the end product by visiting these u-pick farms in Texas.

Crops are at the mercy of Mother Nature, so always check ahead to make sure the farms are open and have the fruit or vegetable you're hoping to find.

FROBERG'S FARM {ALVIN}

Pick your own strawberries through May. This time of year, you can also purchase okra, hot/sweet peppers, cucumbers, bell peppers, squash, eggplant, peas, tomatoes and watermelons. frobergfarm.com

BLESSINGTON FARMS {WALLIS}

In May/June, blueberries, strawberries and thornless blackberries are available for picking. Other activities include fishing and a Farm Funland area with giant slides, a sand mountain, steer roping and more. blessingtonfarms.com

E&B ORCHARDS {HEMPSTEAD}

Nectarines, peaches and blackberries are generally available beginning in mid-May. Don't miss the homemade peach and blackberry ice cream. eandborchards.com