

Around the World at Farmers' Market: Opportunities in Growing and Marketing of Ethnic and Old-fashioned Fruits, Vegetables, and Herbs

Steve Salt, Farmer, Kirksville, Mo.

Not only is the produce industry of North America undergoing radical transformation, so is the composition of its customers. Grim statistics speak of an emerging convenience society in which more than 55 percent of the total national food dollar is spent at fast food outlets, consumers spend less than 20 minutes per grocery store shopping outing, and more than 2/3 of all adolescents have been taught little or nothing about how to cook. Bad news indeed for small-scale truck farmers and market gardeners, right? Indeed.

But there are other statistics. The dominant Anglo-American or European-American ethnic complex has declined sharply from 88 percent of the total population in 1960 to approximately 69 percent today, and is expected to become a minority before 2050. Meanwhile Hispanics have increased from approximately 4 percent in 1960 to 11 percent at present; and at the present rate of increase will constitute about 25 percent of the total U.S. population by 2050. African-Americans have increased from about 9 percent to 14 percent, and are projected to increase to 16 percent by 2050. Asian-Americans grown from less than 1 percent to about 5 percent and are expected to increase to 10 percent by 2050. Even greater growth has occurred in such groups as vegans-vegetarians and macrobiotics adherents, and in religious groups such as Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Hindus, Jains and others who adhere to special dietary codes, often high in non-traditional veggies.

But what does this tremendous demographic shift mean to small-scale veggie grower-marketers?

Great news! Many of the fastest growing demographic groups have culinary practices that utilize large quantities of specialty fruits, herbs and vegetables that are often not

available through supermarkets, or which may be of low-quality or are high priced even if present. Also, many "ethnic" buyers have a strong tradition of shopping at open-air markets where they can deal face-to-face with grower vendors and examine, sample and discuss unpackaged produce. Supermarkets cannot offer this atmosphere and service. Furthermore, per capita consumption of fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs is very much higher in groups such as most Latin Americans, Asians, Mediterranean Europeans, and Middle Easterners, than for "meat-and-potatoes" Americans of northwestern European carnivorous heritage. In some cultures, especially Asian, some fresh fruits and vegetables have great cultural and religious prestige and are used as gifts or offerings. In addition, once trust and a personal relationship are established, many ethnic customers develop extreme vendor loyalty – a major plus for the small marketer!

In ethnic produce marketing, the "first commandment of business" – know thy customer – is no more true than in any other marketing. However, the often large cultural gap between you and your prospective customers demands special attention to this elementary selling principle. The more you know of the language, customs, holidays, and especially, the dietary and culinary requirements of your prospective ethnic customers, the more successful you will be.

Cross-cultural sensitization, if you will, has enabled me to ask useful questions of customers of cultural backgrounds quite unlike my own. Useful questions include:

1) What vegetables (or fruits or herbs) do you want which are not conveniently available?

About Steven Salt

Steve Salt is a small farmer-writer-part-time college teacher who raises diverse ethnic and heirloom vegetables, herbs, and small fruits on his farm near Kirksville, Missouri. He markets his produce through farmers' markets, restaurants, and a CSA. He is the author of "Around the World at Farmers' Market: A Guide for Small Scale Commercial Grower-Vendors of Ethnic & Heirloom Vegetables, Fruits, and Herbs," co-author of "Ecology for Gardeners", and author of numerous magazine articles on small farming and vegetable growing. Intermittently, he teaches soil science, botany, horticulture,

general biology, and environmental conservation at a local community college and a state university.

For more information contact:

Steve Salt
Green Valley Farm
28461 Linderville Trail
Kirksville, Mo. 63501
660-332-7217
saltsgvf@missvalley.com

- 2) In what quantities?
- 3) When?
- 4) Do you need a particular color, or flavor, or maturity, or shape, or size?
- 5) Are there particular processing, or packaging, or storage, or display requirements?
- 6) Can you get seed for me?
- 7) Are there holidays for which special fruits, vegetables, or ornamental plant materials are needed?
- 8) When?
- 9) How far in advance are these needed?
- 10) Is a priest's or rabbi's clearance or blessing required?
- 11) Are there any taboos or religious or cultural prohibitions?

The answers to some of these questions may be arrived at only through extended experience, but you need to seek and remember answers.

Respecting the cultures of others does not mean that you have to despise or denigrate your own. I actually appreciate my own more highly after my interactions with others. However, if you have little tolerance or appreciation for religious or language or cultural differences, you probably will neither enjoy nor be successful at ethnic marketing.

Language barriers are an area of particular concern. If you don't speak the native language of the ethnic person with whom you are dealing, you have to be careful to speak in English slowly and clearly, avoid use of idiom and slang as far as possible, and try to get frequent feedback on understanding.

In some cultures it is extremely rude to ask questions, and that customer standing there smiling and nodding as you speak with her may actually understand almost nothing of what you're saying! Less obviously, even between English-speaking cultural groups, the same word or expression may take on quite different meanings, and every cultural group has its own jargon. If you can at least learn greetings and a few key phrases in the language of your customers – and use them correctly – your ethnic customers will be greatly pleased. The more you understand, the better you'll do, and the more fun you'll have!

What marketing venues are available for ethnic and heirloom produce? Farmers' markets are probably the most obvious and often most profitable outlets, but others include ethnic and vegetarian and macrobiotic restaurants and grocery stores, up-scale supermarkets, roadside stands, mobile peddling, and mail-order or Internet vending.

Other issues include layout and signage at market stands, Sabbaths or other holy or festive days, attempting to assess true local demand, harvest and post-harvest

handling practices, and determining true costs of production. Not infrequently there will be high demand for items such as some tropical fruits that you just won't be able to produce profitably in a temperate climate area. Fortunately, USDA Zones 6, 7, and 8 in Oklahoma and Arkansas are conducive to the raising of a very wide range of fruits, vegetables, and herbs – just about everything except some truly subtropical and tropical ones.

Is ethnic produce difficult to raise? Well, it depends. Truly tropical fruit for sale to, say, West Indians or Polynesians, probably would not be economical to produce in Oklahoma or Arkansas. On the other hand, many Oriental and Balkan perennials and some tropical annuals are actually much better adapted to conditions of the American Midwest and upper South than are standard American varieties of western European genetic origins.

The main trick to ethnic produce growing is, in my opinion, not the raising, but the presenting of them for sale at the right time and place and in the right fashion to match them up with potential ethnic buyers. Most critically, make certain that you sell a service, not just a commodity.

A partial listing of some ethnic produce follows. Keep in mind that even where standard-sounding produce, e.g. tomatoes, is listed, what may be meant is special varieties of this crop. I have omitted many subtropical or truly tropical perennial crops which might profitably be grown only in USDA Zone 9 or warmer.

East Asian ("Oriental") – Chinese, Korean, Japanese with many regional subgroups: Chinese cabbages (pak choi, hakusai, bok choy, napa, etc.), oriental radishes (daikons), snow peas, bitter melons, wax gourds, winter melons, Chinese okra (luffa), pickling melons, adzuki beans, yard-long beans, vegetable soybeans (edamame), fresh ginger, wasabi (Japanese horseradish), perilla/shiso, sweet potato leaves, water spinach, sweet potatoes, certain hot peppers, garlic, burdock root, radish seed pods, edible chrysanthemum, various specialty greens – especially of the mustard family, specialty sweet melons, soup pumpkins/kabocha, oriental cucumbers, bunching onions, jujubes, loquats, oriental pears, Oriental persimmons, kumquats, strawberries, watermelon seeds, ginkgo nuts, Chinese medicinal herbs – and many others. [Also, a variety of subtropical fruits, Zone 8+]

South/Southeast Asian – Thai, Vietnamese, East Indian, etc.: HOT peppers, specialty eggplants, baby edible gourds (lagenarias), bitter melons, ridged luffas, chickpeas, mung beans, winged beans, sword beans, rice beans, tropical oriental cabbages, okra, tomatoes, coriander and cilantro, rat-tailed radish, garlic, lemongrass, galangal, specialty herbs such as vap ca, rau ram, rau dang, water pepper, la deaong, etc., Indian carrots, Indian chard, sorrel, moonflower, ajowan, sesame, fenugreek,

holy basil, basella (Malabar spinach), Ayurvedic medicinal herbs and much more. [Also, for Zone 9-11 growers: a wide variety of fruits]

Southeast European/Middle Eastern –Romanian, Serbian, Greek, Turkish, Lebanese, Arab, Armenian, Iranian, etc.: Beets, cabbage, edible gourds, garlic, basil, cubeb pepper, Lebanese zucchini, melokhiya (Jew's mallow), purslane, grape leaves, Armenian and beit alfa cucumbers, specialty potatoes, chickpeas, lentils, bay leaves, radishes, coriander and cilantro, cress, Turkish rocket, alexanders, tarragon, scallions, parsley, fenugreek, honey, tomatoes, tart apples, pomegranates, Cornelian cherries, hazelnuts, walnuts, tree-ripe apricots and many more. [Also some Zone 8+ subtropical fruits]

East European /Russian: Tomatoes, sweet peppers, kale, cabbage, beets, potatoes, horseradish, turnips, chufa nuts, summer squash, ground cherries (Cossack pineapples), rhubarb, sorrel, Russian licorice, buckwheat, sunflower seeds, Russian apples, Bulgarian plums, rowanberry, quince, sea buckthorn, Cornelian cherries, cloudberries, currants, bilberries, poppy seeds, hazelnuts, walnuts, caraway, paprika, European anise, etc.

Italian: Basils, radicchio, ciccoria (chicory), arugula (rocket), cardoon, cucuzzi, plum/paste tomatoes, specialty lettuces, specialty eggplants and sweet peppers, artichokes, fava beans, Florence fennel (finocchio), Romanesco and other specialty broccoli, flat (Roma) beans, chioggia beets, zucchinis, salsify, scorzonera, garlics, rocambolo, oregano, rosemary, sage, Italian (flat) parsley, pine nuts, azaroles, filberts, chestnuts, etc. [Zone 8+ subtropical fruits –olives, citrons, oranges, clementines, and many more.

French: Filet and flageolet beans, Charentais melons, sorrel, tarragon (French, not Russian!), rosemary, thyme, fresh mint, sweet marjoram, catnip, many specialty lettuces, mâche (corn salad), corne de cerf (buckhorn plantain), endive, cornichon cucumbers, French dandelions, purslane, white asparagus, baby new potatoes, tiny peas (petit pois), shallots, leeks, summer turnips, tiny carrots, French breakfast radishes, ball zucchinis, old-fashioned apples, tart cherries, pears, haut bois strawberries, etc.

German/Scandinavian/Continental: Strawberry blite, rapunzel/rampion, fennel, parsley, chives, savory, Continental arugula, flageolet beans, celeriac, Hamburg parsley roots, endives, chicory, corn salad, kale, specialty lettuces, German radishes, orach, purslane, specialty celeries, dill, anise, mints, cabbages, beets, horseradish, yellow and fingerling potatoes, kohlrabi, pumpkin seeds, black currants, jostaberries, fresh raspberries, lingonberries, Alpine strawberries, hazelnuts, medicinal herbs, etc.

Latin American (many regional differences): A HUGE variety of hot peppers, tomatillos, cilantro, culantro,

cumin, pericon, estafiate, epazote, toronjil, Mexican oregano, black (turtle) beans, huanzontli (Aztec spinach), vegetable amaranth, waterleaf, gherkins, chilacoyote, tepary beans, jicama, winter squashes, peanuts, sweet potatoes and yams, red beans, black sweet corn, flour corn, chestnuts, tamarillos, and a great deal more.

[Also a huge variety of tropical fruits]

Traditional "Dixie" (Southeastern U.S. cultural origin): Hominy corn, watermelons, collards, turnip and mustard greens, cheeses, peanuts, okra, white half-runner beans, Crowder or black-eye peas, horticulture beans, butterbeans, sweet potatoes, white yams, ramps (a sort of potent garlic-onion-scallion), Mayhaws, American persimmons, paw paws, rabbit-eye blueberries, muscadine grapes, blackberries, maypops, haws, and a whole lot more.

Macrobiotics adherents: High-lysine corn (maize), kudzu, daikons, seaweeds, cabbage family greens and root crops, watercress, mugwort, lotus roots and seeds, burdock, spelt, shiso/perilla, quinoa, kamut wheat, pumpkin, winter squash.

I could also furnish menus for Africa, the British Isles, highland South America, the South Pacific, Australian aborigines, Iberia, Native Americans, etc., but the above examples will suffice.

But suppose you think no ethnic customers are found in your area.

1) Look more closely. Many ethnic people – especially when they live isolated from concentrations of other members of their group – don't wear signs on their backs and tend to blend with the local population but still appreciate the cuisine of their heritage! You'd be surprised how many members of ethnic groups – or folks who remember their immigrant grandmother's cooking – live in even remote Anglo-Saxon-dominated rural areas. Especially any town with a college or university or military base of any appreciable size, no matter how isolated will probably host a significant ethnic population. Besides, as a small grower-marketer you don't need huge numbers of customers; a small group of loyal clients would actually serve your needs best.

2) The above is a partial listing of the special fruit, vegetable and herb interests of a few ethnic groups. There are many other groups. Observe and think! At a minimum, just about everywhere, be it New England or Alaska, has some distinctive local culture, at least among old-timers! Seek them out. Not only may you gain customers for your produce, but you'll become culturally enriched in the process!

3) Besides direct consumer retail sales, there is the potential for small-scale wholesale marketing to ethnic grocery stores, restaurants, etc. These days, how many towns of any appreciable size at all don't have a Chinese

or Italian or vegetarian restaurant?

4) If all else fails, or in addition to the above approaches, you can travel to a mid- or large-sized city with appreciable concentrations of ethnic populations, and sell at a farmers' market or to ethnic or upscale restaurants or grocery stores. Of course in a larger city you'll get more competition from other ethnic vendors and grocery stores. In a rural area, your ethnic customers may be overjoyed to have anyone at all in their area selling their kind of produce!

5) Be creative! All ethnics don't have to obviously look, dress or speak differently from a standard American (if there is such a creature). Selective marketing to an ethnic group defined by religion, ideology, language, ancestral origins, or some combination thereof – is a very viable marketing alternative well-tailored for the little guy (or gal) grower!

In summary, ethnic market-gardening can be a highly attractive niche for many small specialty crop farmers and market-gardeners to explore. Like any other enterprise, it's not suitable for everyone, but it can be very enjoyable and profitable for those with the interest, patience, industry, and adventurous nature to do a good job.

Additional information

Small Farm Today (bi-monthly periodical), 3903 W. Ridge Trail Road, Clark, MO 65243-9525; Telephone: (800) 633-2535; Fax: (573) 687-3148; www.smallfarmtoday.com; e-mail: smallfarm@socket.net

Growing for Market (monthly periodical), P.O. Box 3747, Lawrence, KS 66046; Telephone: (800) 307-8949; Fax: (785) 748-0609; e-mail: growing4market@earthlink.net.

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