

SUNDAY, MAY 4, 1997

TASTE

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HOME GROWN



KEELY WYGNON

Farmers begin asparagus harvest

My Aunt Marge introduced me to u-pick farms 15 years ago this June, on the day before my wedding, and I've been a fan ever since.

Aunt Marge, her sister Nancy, who is my mother-in-law, and I picked the strawberries to serve the next day at my wedding reception. Some were dipped in chocolate, the rest arranged on a platter.

We could have gone to the store to buy strawberries, but spending that time together helped me feel like a family member, and the berries we picked were superior in every way — color, flavor, and aroma.

Every fruit and vegetable has a season, and while you can get some very good produce at the market, home grown is better. Some of us are too busy to garden. U-pick, or fresh picked from a farm, is the next best thing.

Local farmers started harvesting asparagus this week. Expect to pay \$1 to \$1.50 a pound for u-pick, or freshly picked asparagus.

Michigan ranks third in the nation in asparagus production behind California and Washington. According to the Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board, there are about 70 Michigan asparagus growers producing more than 25 million pounds of asparagus each year. Most of Michigan's asparagus is grown in counties along Lake Michigan where the soil is sandy, climate moist, and temperatures are 52°F, or slightly above. Oceana County, between Ludington and Muskegon, ranks number one in the state for asparagus, and hosts the National Asparagus Festival.

A variety of activities are offered during the three-day festival June 13-15 at the Oceana County Fair and Crafts Fair, entertainment and asparagus food show. Call (616) 861-8110 for more information, or the online site <http://www.oceana.net/naf/>

Michigan's asparagus harvest begins in early May, and peaks in early June. Because it's only available for a very short time, asparagus truly is one of our state's treasures.

Ward's Orchards

Jay Ward, whose family has been farming the same plot of land in Washtenaw County for 154 years, has about five acres of asparagus. He started harvesting April 30.

"Asparagus is an interesting crop," he said. "It normally lasts a month. Rain and temperature are real important. If it's too hot the season won't last as long."

Ward, whose family offered u-pick asparagus, strawberries, apples, peaches, and pumpkins at their farm, is optimistic. "I was looking at the buds and it looks like a good crop of apples this year," he said. "The peaches look favorable too."

Chris Long grew up in Livonia, married Rob, and moved to a farm in Oakland County. "We offer fresh u-pick asparagus," she said. U-pick strawberry season begins in June.

They're taking orders for fresh picked asparagus at Blake's Big Apple Orchard in Macomb County. Like Ward, Peter Blake, whose family has been farming for 60 years, is keeping his fingers crossed.

"Spring weather — rain and temperature — determines everything," said Blake who runs the business with his brothers Paul and Ray. "We grow about five acres of asparagus. We'll begin offering fresh picked asparagus around May 9 through June 9, or as long as the weather is good." Blake's also offers u-pick strawberries.

Wednesday was a beautiful sunny day with a light misting of rain. But temperatures dropped overnight, and Linda Girard who operates Girard's Produce Farm in Belleville with her husband Mark, was up early checking the asparagus.

"We just started picking asparagus last night," she said. "A lot of people don't realize how hard

Please see HOME GROWN B2

Cinco de Mayo CELEBRATES MEXICO'S INDEPENDENCE

BY KEELY WYGNON
STAFF WRITER

Every day is a celebration at Old Mexico Restaurant in West Bloomfield, but May 5 is special. "On May 5 we celebrate freedom from the French," said Chef Timothy R. Castaneda whose family owns the Old Mexico Restaurants in West Bloomfield and Livonia. But the French did leave something behind — pastries, and breads.

"There are a lot of great bakeries in Mexico where you can see the French influence. You can get great baguettes in Mexico," said Castaneda who grew up in Livonia, and worked at restaurants in Los Angeles, Phoenix and San Francisco before returning home to help run the restaurants founded by his parents Ramon and Vicki Castaneda.

Celebrated with parades and feasting, Cinco de Mayo commemorates the battle that took place between the French troops of Napoleon III, and a Mexican army led by General Ignacio Zaragoza in Puebla, Mexico. Zaragoza and his army, outnumbered three to one by the French, won. The victory marked the beginning of the end of European occupation of Mexico.

"The Indians were there first, and the Europeans took over," said Castaneda. Early maize cultivation in Mexico as early as 10,000 B.C., led to a farming culture.

Conquering armies brought ingredients, which have become part of the Mexican food palate. "The Spanish brought cattle, pork, cheese, wheat, rice, onions, and nuts. The Mexicans already had chocolate, beans, corn, and tomatoes," said Castaneda. Also indigenous to Mexico, chilies, squash, and avocados were discovered by conquerors, and introduced to Europeans, and later Americans.

"The Aztecs ate avocados, as

noted by the early Spanish explorers," writes John F. Mari in "The Dictionary of American Food and Drink," (Hearst Books, New York, copyright 1994). "Horticulturist Henry Perrine planted the first avocados in Florida in 1893. It was reported in 1829 by a Spanish missionary that the Aztecs put chile peppers in everything they ate, including chocolate. Chiles may first have been brought into what is now the United States by General Juan de Oñate, who founded Santa Fe in 1598. The oldest evidence of squash being used as food dating back to between 7000 and 5500 B.C. was found at the Ocampo Caves in Mexico, whence they were carried to North America. Evidence of squash has been found in the burial mounds of Ohio, Kentucky, and Virginia, from 2,000 years ago."

"Mole combines Spanish and Mexican culinary traditions: it's a mixture of chilies, chocolate, and nuts such as almonds," said Castaneda. Follo en Mole — Chicken breast with chocolate flavored gravy, is one of the items on Old Mexico's menu.

Mexicantown in Detroit celebrates Cinco de Mayo noon to 6 p.m., rain or shine, today at the Mexican Fiesta Gardens on Bagley between 20th street and the I-76 Service Drive. Entertainment, and traditional Mexican cuisine await. Call (313) 842-0450 for information.

Locally, Cinco de Mayo will be celebrated at Old Mexico in West Bloomfield with live music, and piñatas. The restaurant will be open 4-10 p.m. today in celebration of Cinco de Mayo. A Latin-style band will perform 7-10 p.m.

A mariachi band will play 8-10 p.m. Monday. Tim's Shrimp and Chicken Diabla made with a spicy chipotle cream sauce is a featured menu item at the West Bloomfield location, 5568 Drake Road,



Taste of Mexico: Timothy R. Castaneda prepares Chicken Fajitas, one of Old Mexico's specialty dishes.

(corner of Walnut Lake Road), (810) 661-8088. Regular restaurant hours are 5-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; noon to 11 p.m. Friday; 5-11 p.m. Saturday.

Old Mexico, 28407 Five Mile Road, (between Inkster and Middlebelt) Livonia, (313) 421-3310, is smaller than the West Bloomfield restaurant, but offers many of the items that have made these restaurants so popular. The restaurant is open 10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 10:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday; (closed Sunday).

Rio Bravo Cantina, 18265 Victor Parkway (at Seven Mile Road) in Livonia, (313) 542-0700, is "having a party 4-11 p.m. Monday," said Greg Spangis, one of two managers. "There will be a tent in the parking lot. We'll have live entertainment beginning at 6 p.m. with the Ron Codon Show,

games and giveaways, and a jalapeno eating contest. Q95.5 FM will be there too."

Trini & Carmen's, 1019 Maple between Crooks & Livonia) Clawson, (810) 280-2826, is celebrating 1-5 p.m. today with drink specials, piñatas, and giveaways. Children age six and under eat free 1-5 p.m. today. On Monday there will be drink and restaurant specials all day. Restaurant hours are 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 11 a.m. to midnight Friday-Saturday; 1-9 p.m. Sunday.

Plymouth Landing, 340 North Main Street, Plymouth, (313) 455-3700, is offering Mexican food specials on Monday, including a special dessert — ice cream topped apple tortillas. Lunch and dinner are served 11 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. See recipes inside.

Importer specializes in French wines

Wine Picks

■ Chardonnay outsells its nearest competitor cabernet sauvignon two to one. From the 1995 vintage we recommend: Chateau St. Jean Chardonnay \$13; Meridian Reserve Chardonnay, Edna Valley \$15; Dry Creek Vineyard Chardonnay \$17; Deloach Sonoma Coast Chardonnay \$14; Pine Ridge Knollside Chardonnay \$15.50; Shafer Red Shoulder Ranch Chardonnay \$34 — outstanding.

■ Sauvignon blanc remains one of the best buys despite escalating California wine prices. It's unbeatable with seafood.

Try: 1996 Geyser Peak Sauvignon Blanc \$13; 1995 Beringer Sauvignon Blanc \$10; 1995 Tait Street Sauvignon Blanc \$8; 1996 Canyon Road Sauvignon Blanc \$8.

■ Merlot is luxurious and luscious. From vintage 1994 we recommend: Columbia Crest Merlot \$14.50; Dry Creek Vineyard Merlot \$21; Pine Ridge Merlot, Cananda \$31.50.

■ Cabernet Sauvignon — unbeatable with grilled beef. Again from 1994, try: Turnbull Cabernet Sauvignon \$24; Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon \$20; Pine Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford \$25.50; Geyser Peak Cabernet Sauvignon \$17 — exceptional value.

BY ELEANOR & RAY HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

If you've purchased California wine recently, you've noticed that prices are up: way up for ultra-premium brands. With the dollar in a favorable ratio to the French franc currently, many French wines now appear affordable by comparison.

Choosing French wines is difficult for the uninitiated. We offer a rule we've expressed before — buy based on the importer's reputation. A few wines imported by Weygant-Metler have been available in this market, but there's a brew here now. Owner Peter Weygant was born on a farm in Illinois. He had his first taste of wine in college. Without capital, an early start in the wine business was impossible. "I went to law school so I could earn a living," he admitted.

With a law practice in Illinois, he had an opportunity to shop at Chicago's many fine wine stores and hone his palate. In 1979, Weygant made a southeast Pennsylvania land purchase with his brother and started Stargazers Vineyard. In 1981, he moved his law practice to Pennsylvania as his interest in wine grew. In 1985, he made his first visit to France accompanied by his French-speaking wife Maria. Forgetting in the back of their heads was the idea to discover and import wine from a select number of small producers. Permit to import was granted in 1986 and the first container of 700 cases landed in 1987.

"I got lucky," Weygant said. "Several of the wines got good reviews from Robert Parker Jr. in his Wine Advocate."

To stay in the import business, Weygant knew he had to increase the size of his company. Today, he

imports 25,000 cases of French wines only, sourced from small, personally-selected estates with productions no greater than 5,000 cases. His distribution extends to 25 states. He's his ownational sales director stamping the country enthusiastically selling wines.

"In order to compete with larger import companies I have to come up with exceptional wine that is a good value," Weygant said. In our opinion, he has done just that in his wine choices from France's Loire Valley, Burgundy, Beaujolais, Rhone, southern France, Alsace and Provence region. We recommend the following superstars from a stellar collection:

1995 Boleau Chablis \$17.50 makes a great seafood match. 1995 Serge Dagueneau Pouilly-Fume \$18.75 is a ripe and rich rendition of sauvignon blanc. 1995 Schafit Chasnelas "Vieilles Vignes" \$15.75 is a real find from Alsace. Chasnelas is not a well-known grape outside his homeland. Vieilles Vignes translates as old vines and these are 70 years old. This is a refreshing spring and summertime pour replete of ripe pear and peaches. Chardonnay lovers will be charmed by 1994 Melin Pouilly-Fume, Clos Soufrandise Vieilles Vignes \$25.50. These are 45 to 75-year-old vines yielding a rich, yet delicate wine with balanced oak nuances.

1995 Domaine Guillemin Durand \$9 is a syrah from the Languedoc that's blackberry, spice and everything nice.

Please see WINE B2



LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

■ Recipes for working moms

■ Main Dish Miracles