

The Fruit Maestro

Andy Mariani's Morgan Hill heirloom wonderland keeps fans nationwide drooling

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Tucked in northeast Morgan Hill between a housing development and Live Oak High School's football field, Andy Mariani grows some of the best rare fruits in the world.

Mariani doesn't deal in grocery-store variety cherries, peaches or plums - he leaves that to his conventional farming cousins at Mariani Packing Company, a dried fruit company once based in San Jose.

At Andy's Orchard, Mariani grows rare and exotic heirloom varieties from the days before cross-country shipping forced growers to choose hybrids for pack-ability over taste.

Tree-ripened Baby Crawford Peaches, golden Inca Plums, Blenheim apricots, Black Republican cherries, White Rose nectarines, Gold Dust, Oldmixon Free, Silver Logan and Regina peaches, Elephant Heart, Padre, Gage and Mirabella plums tantalize taste buds on a suburban 30-acre parcel over which developers, too, drool.

He and his crews handpick nearly 100 varieties of "stone fruits," named for their stone-like pits, almost all grown from old-fashioned seed varieties.

His focus on taste in the region that was once the world's fruit basket has attracted the attention of foodies nationwide, most recently a writer for Gourmet magazine who is to peaches, plums, cherries what Robert Parker of Wine Spectator is to zinfandel, merlot and chardonnay.

"He's the only three-star fruit grower I know of," said Gourmet's fruit correspondent David Karp, referring to France's one, two and three-star restaurant rating system that has celebrated chefs fighting for just one star. "There's nobody like him in the U.S."

Karp calls himself a "Fruit Detective" and searches the world for Gardens of Eden. He laments mass-produced fruit for its "dumbing down" effect on flavor, and says Mariani is one of a small group of farmers that care enough about quality to pick fruit when it's ripe, not when it's rock hard and easily trucked to the supermarket.

"I think fruit in and of itself has a personality," said Mariani Sunday as visitors tasted 70 types of rare peaches, plums, nectarines and other late-summer fruit from his orchard. "Each variety has a story to it."

Like the Baby Crawford Peach. Its sweet-tangy peach taste is more powerfully flavored than the grocery store standard. Mariani salvaged the golden specimen from University of California laboratories that were evaluating it as a peach for drying. They found the aromatic, juicy peaches to be too small and delicate for conventional production, and the Baby Crawford, known to technicians by its serial number, almost never left the lab.

"We rescued it from the genetic scrap heap," Mariani said.

These melt-in-your-mouth peaches conjure the old tasty Crawford variety, and since they're small Mariani named them Baby Crawford. They've become his most popular peach, with customers placing advance orders each season so they're sure to get a box.

Other growers might have dismissed the Baby Crawford as too much of a headache, too tedious to be profitable. Not Mariani.

"I'm a collector," Mariani explained. "It's the artisan grower model."

Mariani's edge is his encyclopedic knowledge of fruit, his extensive variety, a practical farming style and his location, 45-acres in the "Valley of the Heart's Delight," as Santa Clara Valley was once known. Like winegrowers who speak of terroir, or the influence of soil on taste, Mariani believes place can influence the taste of tree fruits.

His searches for the perfect fruit have taken him to Australia and the old Silk Road city of Tashkent,

Uzbekistan. He has a winemaker's air when talking about a fruit's origin, temperament and taste, and his fruit-tasting guide quotes Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, author of Faust.

But for all his prestige, Mariani is modest. The 58-year-old connoisseur describes himself as a "dirt farmer." He wears a baseball hat and speaks shyly until he gets going on a story about fruit. He stands tall and lumbers through the orchard tour, showing visitors everything from the fruit-drying racks to the best way to bite into a peach. (Bite first into the sun-kissed end opposite the stem for the most flavor.)

Mariani didn't immediately follow his family into agriculture. He went to college in the late 1960s and got a Masters Degree in public administration and government. For a year he worked as the assistant city manager in Saratoga.

Mariani says he would have left the desk job eventually, even if he hadn't fallen ill with a rare skin disease that nearly killed him. The disease is called Pemphigus, the Greek word for blister. He lived with it for 18 years, many of which he spent pumped with toxic "medicines" to ease the pain. A holistic doctor in Vienna took him off of pharmaceutical drugs and led him to recovery.

When he felt well enough he worked in his brother's cherry orchard and collected rare fruit trees. He found rare nectarines, cherries, apricots, peaches and plums.

"My brother wasn't into it," Mariani said. "It was all my deal."

Now his hobby is his livelihood and he's planted varieties all over the 30-acre family homestead plus 15 acres of land that he co-owns with his brother and sister. It's property zoned for housing, but Mariani's farm has remained isolated from suburbia. His courtyard view holds hundreds of fruit trees, Morgan Hill's eastern peaks and an impetuous zinfandel vine that precedes the early Mariani homesteaders.

He practices craftsmanship farming, which focuses on quality over quantity.

"My brother's philosophy is to put fruit on a truck and send it off to market and hope you get what you get," he said. "I'm commercial too [but] my focus is a little bit different."

Mariani aims for niche-market eaters who want the best and most unique flavors, not the cheapest price.

So far the idea seems to be working. Karp is researching a story about Mariani for an upcoming issue of Gourmet. Renowned restaurants in New Orleans have a standing fruit order for whatever's ripe that week, and upscale markets such as Cosentino's carry special displays of Andy's Orchard fruit.

And Bay Area epicureans are beginning to take note of what South Valley has to offer.

"It's just in our backyard," marveled Menlo Park's Jen Upson, who leads Slow Food Silicon Valley, the local branch of an international movement that supports healthy, homemade, ecologically sound food.

Sunday was Upson's first visit to the orchard, and she said Mariani is someone her members need to know about.

"This is perfect for the slow food vision," she said. "We want to introduce people to ripe, well-grown food."

Mariani admits that he likes the attention, especially from visitors at his summer fruit tastings.

"It's like inviting people to dinner," he said. "Maybe it's a little bit of showing off. It may sound hokey [but] everyone takes pride in what they're doing."

Mariani's last orchard tour and tasting of the season is Sunday, August 8 at 10 a.m. The orchard and store are located at 1615 Half Road in Morgan Hill. To get there take the Hwy 101 Cochrane Road exit east to Mission View Drive. Make a right on Mission View Drive and then a left on Half Road. Turn left and you'll see the sign for Andy's Orchard on your left. A tour and tasting costs \$10, and for more information visit www.andysorchard.com or call 782-7600.