

Imperfect Demanding Perfect

By Michael Ball



Blemished fruits and vegetables separate humans philosophically. Much like admiring a pretty woman or handsome man, even the plainest of us demands more of the objects of our voyeurism than we provide.

I am in my 30th year of shopping at Boston's Haymarket, 32nd if you count college days when I lived in Cambridge for a bit. I absolutely adore the rickety stalls on Blackstone Street. Also, much like my family members, I have a broad view and make allowances.

Not all are so forgiving.

I recall my late mother-in-law tsk-tsking over my Saturday harvests when she was on one of her protracted visits. For example, I'd bring back a full flat (12 pints overflowing of strawberries) and separate and clean them. A few pints would have a couple of moldy berries.

Sylvia would give a loud and long, "What a shame!" with great sincerity. While I paid 30¢ or perhaps 50¢ per pint, she thought I would have been better off paying \$2 or \$3 a pint in the supermarket. True enough, there were unlikely to be any moldy fruit in those. Then again, they would be half white and as tasteless as packing peanuts.

It would be the same with those tomato-like objects supermarkets stock and sell, the more or less permanent things, hard and vaguely pink, with no scent or flavor. Yet, they too would be without blemish.

I thought of her again recently as a blogger acquaintance exchanged a few emails with me on the subject. One included:

Our biggest problem with Haymarket is quality. The prices are fantastic but often we throw out more than we eat which makes us do two things: 1) question whether the low prices are truly economical and 2) feel like we are being incredibly wasteful consumers. I would love to try the market again but am trying to find strategies that make it truly worth it.

I suspect I can do what he wants, but perhaps not exactly as cleanly as he wants. Among the overlapping issues there are:

- Some vendors specialize and there are the right places to buy fresh herbs or citrus or root veggies. I can help there.

- Some is frequency. The vendors know me by face after so many years and quite a few will warn me off something that isn't that good on a particular weekend. He'd have to show up and greet them as though he were French for awhile to get that.
- Some is watching, particularly the college students as summer help. Be sure to see that they take the product they sell in plain sight. When they bend out of sight to a hidden box, that's often trouble. Hear how the Asian-American women yell at them if they try that.
- Accept that the cheapest is sometimes the riskiest. Most fruits and veggies and half or a quarter of supermarket prices. That written, it makes sense to scan the Thursday grocery fliers; sometimes the supers have a great loss leader like 77¢ a pound black grapes that you may not be able to top at the Haymarket. Mostly though if the green beans are 75¢ and gorgeous, don't hold out for the 4 pounds for a dollar; you can be pretty sure the vendor dumping goods at absurd prices has stuff bad or about to go bad. Many would rather dump that, but a few will appeal to greedy shoppers.
- If you want to get serious about a trip, walk through the front and then the back of the market. After all, it's one long block and two perpendicular short half-blocks. See what looks good and fix the prices for your favorites on the way. Then swing back through with the bags you remembered to bring (I use a huge messenger bag for most stuff).

Back to the philosophical part, my mother-in-law did not grow veggies and fruits for subsistence. My grandfather, [William B. Michael](#), did and had since the Depression. Granddad taught me many realities of vegetative matter.

By the bye, my mother said she, her brother and sister, and their mother really didn't know there was a Depression. That is, they were not grossly ignorant, rather Granddad had them covered. He had a full-time job (48 years on the B&O). He sold Chevrolets on the weekend. He had a part-time dry cleaner and tailor shop next to the house. Then, there were those gigantic gardens.

By the time my grandmother (with neighbors, children and grandchildren) canned, the shelves lining the basement floor to ceiling has Ball jars galore and the huge freezer was full of bags of Lima beans, corn and more. Snap beans, tomatoes, pickles and...it never seemed to stop.

My mother also told of how embarrassed she had been to wear homemade clothes from her father. Then she went away to college and bought clothes off the rack. She be damned, they didn't fit perfectly. She had worn tailored clothes until she was 18!

Many summers I worked with him from weeding through harvest on several acres. He was a great respecter of people, but also of vegetables and fruit. He taught me enjoyment of what we grew as well. If it was time for asparagus, we'd walk down one of the 100-foot rows, cutting the perfectly ripe spears. Lightly steamed minutes later, they were sublime.

I also learned to take beautifully ripe tomatoes, redolent with that slightly acrid sweetness, and if one of the gems had a spot of blight or mold, we's cut that and direct it to a stew or other sauce. The taste and color were great. As with today, the "bad" tomatoes were far better used that way than any permanent supermarket food.

So that is another philosophic angle of food. From a man who waltzed his family through the Depression, Granddad avoided waste. He also knew sapid from insipid. I refuse to fill my mouth with bland food as a result.

Many Haymarket fruits and vegetables are ripe and ready. The supermarkets don't want that, regardless of the grand tastes and aromas. They need food that will ship around for a week and sit in the store for two more without showing blemishes or mold. That's the sturdy, Styrofoam® stuff you find behind the salad bar sneeze guard.

None for me, thanks. I'll take the lush and ready-to-eat stuff. I'll toss the occasional really bad piece and make the most of those with minor flaws. I'm not perfect and don't demand perfect appearance of every tomato and strawberry.

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