

Beard in Portland

Portland had a great public market which was originally built along Yamhill Street for about five blocks, on both sides of the street part of the way and on one side the rest. Farmers and producers took stands, which they rented from the city at nominal sums, and filled them with seasonal display, beginning in the spring with the earliest asparagus and berries and continuing through into the winter with celery bleached to an ivory-whiteness by the Foltz family, all the winter root vegetables, late cauliflower, apples and pears, nuts and wild mushrooms — in effect, the round of the earth's gifts to the palate. In addition, there were poultry, pork and pork products, dairy products, eggs, honeys and some prepared foods. Certain people were the sole vendors of some items. One woman always had fine lemon cucumbers, for instance, and she was inundated with orders when they were in season. Another woman specialized in the heaviest cream imaginable, and this was as much in demand as anything on the market, requiring orders two or three days in advance. The cream was as close to great French cream as one could find, and the flavor was superb with fruits or in sauces, or whipped as a topping for puddings and soufflés. Some people had better corn than others, and one could buy tiny ears of Golden Bantam picked in the morning to be eaten at night.

Apples were a round of delight in themselves, from the early Gravensteins through the Baldwins, the Rambeaux, the Kings, the Spitzenburgs, the Northern Spies, the Winesaps, the Fall Bananas, the Winter Bananas, and the Newtown Pippins. Each apple had its distinctive flavor, texture and color. Each was right for a certain use. The Gravensteins, for example, made perfect pies, baked apples, applesauce and salads, as did the Spitzenburgs, later in the season. My mother loved the scrubby russet look of the Rambeaux, the pungency of the Spitzenburgs and the delicacy of the Baldwin and the Belleflower. All of these had their places in the seasonal schedule and were purchased by the box.

Tomatoes provided a kaleidoscopic array. There were the familiar large and small red ones, huge yellow and whitish ones, and the plum, cherry and pear tomatoes in all colors from pale white-yellow to a pinky red and a deep red.

One could even find morels in the market. I remember the first time I saw them. I was quite shocked by their strange appearance. To me they resembled dried brains (they still do) and I couldn't imagine what they were. I had eaten them at home but had never seen them before in the raw state. But how good they were, made into an omelet, added to the sauce for a chicken served with veal. In fact, when I first had them I thought they were the most delicious morsels I had ever tasted. Later in life I discovered they were as precious



**James Beard never forgot his hometown
Illustration by Stephen Leflar**

as truffles, but I couldn't have enjoyed them any more than I did when I knew them as strange wild mushrooms.

It was an education in food, to know the public market as I did, first as a child when I was largely a spectator and then as a young man when I was a customer. From its international roster of producers – Chinese, Japanese, Italian, German, Swiss, English and a few Czech and other nationalities – I learned the various national vegetables and seasonal specialties. I had my first white raspberries from this market and my first tiny husk tomatoes, also known as ground cherries. The latter come late in the fall and make a superb preserve which is incomparable in flavor and texture. They exist in France in a larger version. I have seen them in various parts of the Northwest and West but never the East, until the last few years.

I particularly remember one very early visit to the market in the company of my nursemaid: We had just been to the doctor's and on the way back stopped to buy a few things for my mother. When they were wrapped and handed to the maid, she said quietly, "Please charge them to Mrs. Beard." The clerk blanched and said, "For God's sake, give me that package. If I sent that to her, she'd kill me."

Despite this account, Mother was not the terror of the Portland market. She was uncompromising in her standards, true, but she could joke with the toughest guy in the market or with the most supercilious shop owner. She would offer advice to farmers on the growing of vegetables, and they, in turn, would counsel her on the cooking of them. It was usually a friendly exchange, but sometimes when Mother was bored by a long-winded purveyor, she would suddenly stride off, muttering a ribald remark under her breath. **On the whole, she was the *fournisseurs*' ideal customer. She had her favorite clerks in every store, and they loved her.**

Delights and Prejudices, James Beard, pgs 31-33 [pgs 48-50 original edition]

James Beard Centenary Prequel – April, 2003 (Discovering Oregon Originals)

Wednesday, April 9 (2nd Wednesday) – 7 pm, U.S. Bank Room, Central Library, 801 SW 10th

Friday, April 11 (2nd Friday) – noon, Madison Room, Oregon Historical Society, 1200 SW Park

The Father of American Cooking was born in Portland on May 5, 1903 and raised here by his culinary inspirations – his mother Elizabeth, and her chef-partner Jue Let.

Presenters: Chef Cory Schreiber of Wildwood & OCHC President David Milholland

