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PRODUCE NOTES

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Colorless, Odorless, and Changing the World

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Strawberries are back in season, which means food sections of newspapers nationwide will be sugared with recipes for strawberry shortcake, strawberry daiquiris and strawberries sliced and splashed with sweet wine. The strawberry industry will be in the papers, too, as **growers make their annual plea to the federal government for an extension on the deadline when the fumigant methyl bromide must be phased out.** Environmental activists bitter over the hesitancy to phase out this ozone-depleting chemical may express outrage at yet another delay. Domestic critics of the worldwide agreement to ban methyl bromide may say the US is folding to unfair foreign pressure. Pro or con we've heard it all before. Missing, though, is a discussion of the deleterious effects methyl bromide has on our bay area food shed and on local land rent prices.

Strawberries thrive in the cool conditions that prevail throughout the summer along California's central coast. In the interior of our state, in the central valley, strawberry growers plant in late summer and over-winter their strawberries for a busy spring harvest. But when the central valley heats up in late spring, strawberry production in the central valley slows down. Strawberry plants go vegetative when conditions get too hot - that is, they cease to flower and concentrate on growing leaves, producing no fruit. The heat that finishes off the spring strawberry harvest in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys also draws in fog off the cold Pacific, cooling the coastlands. Strawberry producers along the coast enjoy a long productive season through summer and fall until winter rains ruin the last developing fruits. **Because most of America is as hot in summer as the central valley, local coastal strawberry growers sell to a nationwide market that is growing fast.** This is where methyl bromide comes in.

Methyl bromide is not, strictly speaking, an insecticide. It is not sprayed on the strawberry crop nor does a methyl "residue" cling in any way to the fruit. **Methyl bromide is a biocide.** It kills everything from gophers and bacteria to weed seeds, bugs, slugs, and worms. Methyl bromide is a colorless, odorless gas that is injected into the soil before a field is planted. A plastic tarp keeps the material from dissipating immediately into space before it can do its deadly work. A field properly treated with methyl bromide is rendered as sterile (temporarily) as any patch of dirt can be. Urbanites familiar with the sight of homes tented for fumigation of termites will understand the concept. Indeed, methyl bromide is a common fumigant for structures and it is marvelously effective. **Methyl bromide also happens to burn holes in the ozone layer that protects our planet from over exposure to deadly radiation.** Is ozone depletion too high a price to pay for cheap strawberries? Some people think so, some don't. Other people don't believe the scientists. No matter what you think about ozone we experience other negative side effects locally due to America's dependency on methyl bromide.

Organic strawberry farmers do without methyl bromide. Strawberry plants are perennial and can yield fruit year after year for the home gardener. Practically speaking, for a grower, only the strawberry plant's first season is profitable. Fruit size diminishes after the first year so the labor costs to fill a basket rise steeply in the second season. Pathogens build up in the soil, too, gradually taking a toll on the strawberry plants overall vitality. The conventional response is to start out "fresh" each year with new

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plants set into soil made "sterile" or "dead" by an application of methyl bromide. A life positive, sustainable alternative to gassing a field with methyl bromide is to rotate strawberry crops with other crops like broccoli or onions. **After four years of resting land from strawberries by growing other vegetable crops and building up the soil with cover crops, a piece of ground can be ready for another healthy crop of strawberries.** Crop rotation lends diversity to our landscape and our food shed as well as ameliorating the pest problems that develop under monoculture cropping systems. Besides, we can't just base our economy on strawberries. Or must we?

California Stone Fruit Update

Apricots: Popycot this week, followed by Trigem. Blenheims in early June.

Apriums, Cherrycots and Pluots: All of these hybrids start soon.

Cherries: Brooks and Tulare this week and next; Bings by last week of May.

Peaches: May Crest and Super Rich this week followed by Queen Crest early next week. No Ray Crest: both Naylor & Cal Organic pulled their RC trees out. Sommerfeld **white peaches**-White Jade and Favorite for next 2 weeks.

Plums: Gar Beaut and Red Beaut by late May.

Nectarines: April Glo and Earli Glo are available.

The problem is that the strip of cool coastal ground suitable for midsummer strawberry production is narrow and land is limited. Because this small growing area is producing a luxury crop for a growing population competition to rent good strawberry land is intense. And consumers will ALWAYS pay more for a luxury than they will for some boring "eat your greens or you won't get any dessert" crop. **Historically strawberry growers have earned a great deal more money per acre than vegetable growers.** Besides, good rotation crops like broccoli or green onions can be grown economically over a much wider range of climates than the picky, delicate strawberry. Competition from conventional growers for **good strawberry ground** drives rents up... and up... and up. In Watsonville it is no trick to find land **leasing for \$1800 per acre** per year (or more.) By contrast, thirty miles inland in Hollister, where I farm and where hot summer weather rules out summer strawberry production, land rents for \$250 to \$350 an acre per year. **Because coastal land that hasn't been fumigated is worthless to conventional berry growers, many landlords demand, as part of your lease contract, that farmers fumigate with methyl before they leave.** After all, why should a landowner have his or her land devalued just because some hippie farmer has issues with blowing another hole in the ozone?

Organic strawberry growers ask more money for a basket of berries than conventional growers because they need to. In part this higher price reflects the higher weeding costs. Organic fertilizers cost more too, both to buy and apply. But more than anything organic berry growers must cover the costs of growing less profitable rotational and cover crops on expensive ground. And most berry growers are renters, too. Think about it. If you own land and you can get \$2000 an acre a year without even lifting a finger, why farm?

To the consumer, I say pay the higher price for sustainably produced strawberries. If you like an organic farm's berries support their rotations and buy some of their other vegetables, too. After all if the earth is going to be farmed sustainably the farmers themselves must be sustained in business even as they sustain higher rents for doing the right thing. **Using methyl bromide is not a sustainable practice - not even our own government thinks so, for they don't repeal the ban on methyl bromide but only delay its implementation.** It's in local consumer's interests to advocate for the ban too. **The rest of the country sees the berries on shortcake; we see the plastic tarps shrouding the landscape to lock in fumigant.** The rest of the country knows California's central coast as a premier strawberry region, we know a once-diverse food shed is becoming simplified into a monocultural agribiz system built on biocides. A few absentee landlords see no end to the money for the rural properties they rent out and the next generation of organic farmers see initial start up costs so high it seems their dreams of farming sustainably where they live will slip out the hole in the ozone forever.



