From Farmers Market



to the lab

Blueberries, raspberries and blackberries glisten in the morning sun at the Owl's Nest Plantation booth at the Charleston Farmers Market.

Organization, creativity and curiosity are key ingredients to preparing multicourse meals from the bounty of local farmers markets.

BY HOLLY HERRICK Of The Post and Courier Staff

fter a long winter of dormant earth and gray skies, spring has returned to the Lowcountry. Azaleas are in bloom, a thick layer of yellow pollen clings to just about everything and, best of all, (most) local farmers markets are open.

That alone is enough to put a spring in my step. Anyone who appreciates fresh produce and a neighborly good time amid friends and farmers (and who

WHIMSY

same way. According to Charleston Farmers Market manager Jo-

doesn't?) feels the

Anna Shumate, "The whole point of the farmers market is to serve as an outreach program for the farmers.'

In short, it's a way for farmers to get their products to market and into consumers' hands without dealing with additional overhead and middlemen. The ever-growing venue, with about 35-40 food vendors in place at the Charleston market for the 2005 season, also allows consumers to support the efforts and fruits of local farmers' labor and to enjoy their nutritious, fresh produce. Finally, going to the market is a way to interact with members of the Greater Charleston community while enjoying the balmy spring weather.



ALAN HAWES/STAFF

Strawberries and cream.

The Charleston Farmers Market is managed by the city's Office of Cultural Affairs, where Shumate is employed. "Local" is defined as anything grown in South Carolina, according to Shumate. Farmers interested in participating in the market are required to pass an inspection, which essentially proves that the farmers are indeed farming.

The Office of Cultural Affairs also puts a "50 percent rule" into play sometime in the middle of May through the end of June. The rule mandates that at least 50 percent of all produce brought by farmers to the Charleston market is locally grown. Since that is peak growing and harvesting season in Charleston,

this rule translates to the best time of year for procuring local goods at the market, and it also is designed to protect "sole crop" farmers, according to Shumate.

Since the point of the farmers market is to purchase and use local produce, it helps to come armed with a curious mind and a strong appreciation for the

Don't be afraid to ask farmers if the produce in which you're interested is local. And don't hesitate to look, smell and touch (when appropriate) to verify fresh-

Because the local markets have grown to include so many new vendors carrying a greater variety of products, it means that buying there can translate to a virtual "one-stop shop." It's possible to tote the goods home that morning and turn them into a nutritious, show-stopping springtime meal that afternoon or

To do that, you have to take inventory of your pantry and refrigerator before you head out the door. This will give you a sense of the "taste palette" you will have to work with to embellish your market purchases to create a meal. It's always helpful to have staple items such as eggs, grains, stock, condiments, bread, milk, etc., (see list of suggested items on Page 5D) with which to work. Know what they are before you leave, and keep them in the back of your mind as you're selecting market purchases.

That's where you leave your thinking behind. Because if you go to the market locked in on any one idea (for example, I've got a dozen eggs, so I'm going to buy spinach and make a spinach quiche), you're missing the point entirely. It should be the reverse. When you see a batch of lovely, fresh spinach, you should think about what you might want to do with it, and then you remember the eggs. Voila! the solution. Tonight I'll make a spinach quiche!

Being too restrictive or shopping at the farmers market with a shopping list means you miss the best of the produce.

See MARKET, Page 4D

From Farmers Market

MARKET from Page 1D

Going in with an open mind not only increases creative alternatives, it also improves the quality and freshness of what you prepare, and making it will be so much more fun.

Don't throw practicality entirely to the wind, however. Buy only what you will use in the next day or two. Any more than that (unless it's something that freezes well, such as strawberries) and you're wasting the freshly picked nutrients of the food you've purchased at market. Store the food properly when you get it home.

Planning a farmers market menu for your family or friends for that evening should be inspired by the gentle flavors and lively colors of the produce. Don't make it complicated. Preparations should be simple, delicate and light. Let your imagination and basic cooking skills go to work, and you can easily create a fabulous meal from a few hours spent shopping at any local farmers market.

SAMPLE MENU

Here are some recipes I created using the inspiration provided by produce purchased at a recent Charleston Farmers Market. Use it as a gentle guide, not a formula, for creating your own. After all, in a few short weeks, the local produce players will be entirely different.

Earthy, mild spinach and lively, spicy radishes are in season right now and play together beautifully with the sweet crunch of candied nuts and a pert vinaigrette. Toss the salad lightly with the vinaigrette, just enough to coat, and serve immediately.

Spinach and Radish Salad With Candied Walnuts and a Red Wine Vinaigrette

For the vinaigrette:
1 shallot, finely diced
4 tablespoons red wine vinegar
1 tablespoon honey
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
Salt and fresh ground pepper to

1/4 cup olive oil

For the candied nuts:

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 tablespoon butter

1 cup coarsely cut walnuts

Salt and fresh ground pepper, to
taste

2 tablespoons brown sugar

LOCAL PRODUCE

Here are some of the fruits and vegetables being harvested by local farmers. Most can be found at Charleston area farmers markets.

Arugula Asparagus Broccoli Cabbage Carrots English peas Green leaf lettuce Green onions Mesclun (aka spring mix) New Irish red potatoes Purple Peruvian fingerling pota-Radishes Red leaf lettuce Romaine lettuce Russian banana fingerling potatoes Spinach Strawberries

For the salad: 6 cups fresh spinach, cleaned with tough stem removed 20 radishes, cleaned, trimmed and guartered

Sugar snap peas

Prepare the vinaigrette. Combine the shallot, vinegar, honey, mustard, salt and pepper in a small bowl. Whisk to combine. Gradually drizzle in the olive oil, whisking constantly. Taste to verify seasoning. Cover and set aside one hour at room temperature.

Prepare the nuts: Heat a medium-size saute pan over mediumhigh heat. Add the oil and butter. When bubbling, add the walnuts, salt and pepper. Toss to coat. Continue tossing until golden, about 2 minutes. Add the sugar, continuing to toss. Reduce heat to medium. Cook until the sugar has caramelized to a dark, golden color. Remove from heat and drain on paper towels. Cool.

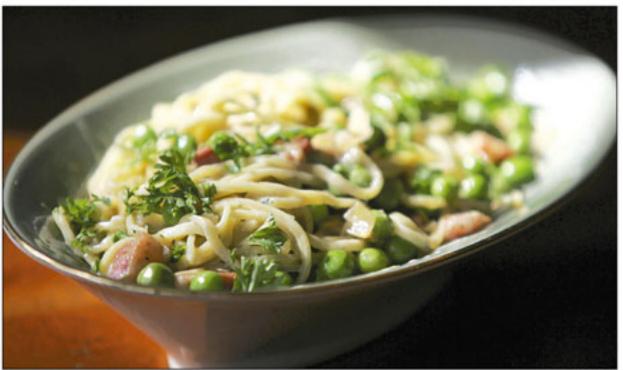
To prepare the salad, toss the spinach with the radishes. Add the vinaigrette and toss to coat. Season the salad with salt and pepper. Arrange the salad on individual plates or a single platter and drizzle with the nuts. Serves 4.

Asparagus is a universally loved seasonal rite of passage. Tender spears do not need to be partially



HOLLY HERRICK/STAFF

Assorted fresh pasta selections are available at Rio Bertolini's Fresh Pasta booth, to help round out freshly selected vegetables and produce for a whimsical market meal.



ALAN HAWES/STAFF

Roasted Garlic Spaghetti With English Peas, Pancetta and Leeks in Cream Sauce.

peeled. However, by peeling the tougher outer edge about 3 inches up from the base of the spear, a translucent, light green color is revealed, which improves presentation. An easy-to-prepare orange-shallot butter provides pretty color and bouncy flavor and can be prepared ahead. Use only

fresh-squeezed orange juice.

Steamed Asparagus With Orange-Shallot Butter

For Orange-Shallot Butter: 1 cup fresh orange juice 1 shallot, finely chopped 1/2 stick (4 tablespoons) unsalted butter, room temperature

For the steamed asparagus: 2 bunches asparagus, cleaned and peeled salt

See MARKET, Page 5D

KEEPIN' THE GREEN

When cooking green vegetables, such as the English peas and asparagus used in the recipes in this article, two cooking techniques are used. They are "blanch" and "refresh."

These methods are employed to help preserve the natural chlorophyll found in green vegetables, thus maintaining their bright green hue.

Blanching is a quick cook in boiling, well-salted water. By flashcooking the vegetable, the risk of losing green color is limited. The salt helps lock in color, too. After cooking, the vegetables are "refreshed" by submerging them in ice water or by running cold water over the vegetables in a sieve. This instantly stops the cooking and again, reduces the risk of color loss. Other benefits include the ability to reheat the vegetables just before serving (if desired) and prepping the vegetables in advance.

Water used during blanching, along with any vegetable trimmings (as with the accompanying asparagus recipe), can be saved and used later as part of a vegetable stock and/or the basis of a soup to be prepared at a later date. This limits vegetable waste and also reduces the loss of nutrients that may have been extracted during the cooking process.



ALAN HAWES/STAFF

Steamed Asparagus With Orange-Shallot Butter.

From Farmers Market to the table

MARKET from Page 4D

To prepare the Orange-Shallot Butter, put the orange juice and shallot in a small sauce pan. Bring up to a boil and reduce to a simmer over medium-high heat. Continue cooking until the juice has reduced to ¼ cup. Set aside to cool. When cool, stir into the softened butter to combine. Roll into a 1/2-inch-wide tube in parchment paper and refrigerate, or refrigerate in the bowl to set.

Meanwhile, bring enough water to just cover the asparagus up to a boil in a large, broad-bottomed pot. Salt generously. Arrange the asparagus horizontally in the pot once the water boils. Cook until the asparagus is just crisp-tender (about 4-5 minutes). Drain and refresh under cold running water until the asparagus is cool.

To serve, arrange the asparagus on a serving platter, cover with plastic wrap and microwave to reheat. Top with several pats of the butter and serve immediately. Or, reheat the asparagus in a saute pan with a few pats of butter over medium heat. Serve immediately and top with some pats of the orange butter. Serves 6

Rio Bertolini's Fresh Pasta is a recent addition to the Charleston and Mount Pleasant farmers markets. Bertolini carries 15 flavors of fresh pasta and eight types of ravioli. Fresh pasta is a tasty alternative to the dried variety you probably have in your pantry, and is the perfect flavor backdrop to delicate spring vegetables such as peas and leeks. Bertolini suggests cooking his roasted garlic spaghetti for 11/2 to 2 minutes in well-salted, boiling water. He advises that it's better to slightly overcook fresh pasta than to undercook it. Cook fresh pasta within three days of purchase, or it can be frozen for up to three months. Serves 2-3.

Roasted Garlic Spaghetti With English Peas, Pancetta and Leeks in a Cream Sauce

For the spaghetti: 2 servings Rio Bertolini's roasted garlic spaghetti

For the sauce:

1/2 cup English peas (pods removed), blanched and refreshed

1 tablespoons olive oil 21/4-inch-thick slices of pancetta, diced

1 leek, green stalk removed, cleaned and cut into a 1/4-inch

3 tablespoons dry white wine 1/4 cup chicken stock

1/4 cup whole cream

(Light) salt and fresh ground pepper

1/4 cup grated parmesan or Pecorino cheese

Prepare the peas in advance. Remove the pods and rinse the peas. Bring well-salted water to a boil and add the peas. Blanche for 2-3 minutes. Drain and refresh under running, cold water. Set

To prepare the sauce, heat the olive oil in a large saute pan over medium-high heat. Add the pancetta and toss to coat. Cook until the pancetta is brown and most of the excess fat has been rendered. Drain off any excess fat. Reduce the heat to medium. Add the leek and sweat over medium-low heat, stirring. Cook until just softened, 2-3 minutes. Add the wine and cook until it has reduced to almost nothing. Add stock and cook until reduced to half. Add cream and cook through. Season with salt and pepper. (Remember, the pancetta and cheese are salty, so be careful with additional salt.) Set aside.

Just before you're ready to serve, bring a large pot of generously salted water to a boil. Add the pasta and stir. Cook until just tender, about 2-3 minutes, and drain.

Meanwhile, add the peas to the sauce and heat through over medium heat. Add the cooked pasta and cheese to the pan. Toss to distribute evenly. Serve immediately.

Warm weather is all about ease in the kitchen. Why not let your neighborhood grocer or baker make the cake? Angel food cake is the perfect sponge for silky cream and sweet strawberries. I serve this simple dessert through-

AT THE READY

The following is a list of suggested items for a more productive larder to enable whimsical, practical cooking once you've returned from the farmers market. Modify according to your personal taste.

Cream or milk

Butter

Yogurt or sour cream

Assorted cheeses, including aged cheeses like parmesan or Pecorino

Assorted vinegars, including red wine and balsamic

Wine

Fresh orange juice or oranges

Spices Mustard

Horseradish

Mayonnaise Honey (available at most local markets)

Fresh herbs (available at most local markets)

Bacon, ham or sausage

Flour

Bread (available at most local markets)

Rice — brown, white (short and long grain), risotto

Assorted raw nuts

Canned or dried legumes such as lentils, split peas, kidney beans, black beans and navy beans

Lemons or limes Eggs

Garlic

Onions Celery

Fresh or frozen beef, pork, chicken, game, fish

Best-quality chicken, beef, and/or vegetable stock

out strawberry season and never break a sweat. Arranging the strawberries between thin layers of cake makes for an extra special presentation.

Strawberries & Cream With Angel Food Cake

I quart strawberries, trimmed, rinsed and thinly sliced 1/4 cup sugar 1 medium-size angel food cake, cut into 12 thin slices 1 pint whole cream

Fresh mint sprigs for garnish

(optional)

Clean and slice the strawberries. Toss with the sugar. Cover and set aside to macerate for about 1 hour. To serve, arrange 1 slice of cake in a small bowl, top with a few tablespoons of berries, repeat with cake, and another layer of strawberries. Pour a generous 3-5 tablespoon serving of cream over the berries and cake. Serve immediately. Garnish with a fresh mint spring if desired. Serves 4.

LOCAL FARMERS MARKETS

- Charleston Farmers Market: Now open; 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays at Marion Square, King and Calhoun streets.
- Mount Pleasant Farmers Market: Now open; 4 p.m. until dark Tuesdays at the front lawn of Moultrie Middle School on Coleman Boulevard.
- North Charleston Farmers Market: Opens May 19; 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Thursdays in Westvaco Park, Remount Road and North Rhett Avenue.
- Summerville Farmers Market: Now open; 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays at First Citizens Bank parking lot behind Summerville Town Hall.