


MARTHA STEWART

Living

America the Beautiful

THE BEST IDEAS FROM
COAST TO COAST



KEY LIME DAIQUIRI, PAGE 69,
AND SHRIMP COCKTAIL, PAGE 144



rip for the eating

TEXT BY
DAN BARBER

FOR AN AWARD-WINNING NEW YORK CHEF, BITING INTO ONE EXTRAORDINARY APRICOT YEARS AGO OPENED HIS EYES AND HEART TO THE MAGIC OF FARMERS' MARKETS AND THE PURSUIT OF PRODUCE PICKED AND EATEN AT THE PERFECT MOMENT IN TIME.

Many years ago, as a young line cook wandering through a farmers' market in Provence, I stood in front of a mountain of apricots. It was the second week in August, prime time not just for French housewives on the prowl, with their large straw baskets and sharp eyes, but also for the famed tree fruits of the region. A portly farmer was shaking her outstretched hands at me with insistence, as if to say, "Look here, you silly young American. This is the essence of Provence. It's all here, right now. It will be gone soon, and you'll be sorry!"

I could have sworn she said, "*Mon dieu*, you must eat." By then I was homesick—for some English to be spoken and for some loving care—and I was exhausted. I had been working six days a week for two long, blisteringly hot months in the kitchen of a mad chef, my head half buried in a sauté pan, frying zucchini flowers and preparing pistou. I knew strikingly little about Provence but didn't care: After two years in France, cooking for various chefs, I'd decided to end this apprenticeship early and return home. I spent my last day walking around the farmers' market, and that's when I came upon the apricots.

The fruit was like nothing I had ever seen: plump to nearly bursting, and blushed a deep red.

"Apricot?" I asked, to be sure.

"*Oui, monsieur, des abricots*," she said, pointing to the large sign in front of my face.

I started to pick one out. But as if swatting a fly, Madame brushed aside my hand and my feeble attempt at identifying ripe fruits. She lovingly played her fingers like a keyboard over her small treasures, landing on one with her middle finger and tapping it several times very gently. "*Parfait*," she said—not to me, but to the apricot, holding it up in the morning light. She wrapped the apricot in soft tissue paper (ignoring my protestations of wanting to eat it right then), collected my money, and handed the fruit to me, almost reluctantly.

I took a bite. I cannot say exactly what happened next. I was at once entranced and utterly confused—not because I was tasting the best apricot of my life, but because I was tasting an apricot I had never imagined could exist.

In that moment of confusion and bliss, gripping the apricot close to my mouth, I attempted in my best French to inquire about this tiny miracle. "*C'était né, où?*" (This was born, where?) is what I came up with. I suddenly teared up and looked away. It was the emotion of the moment—my two years in France were over, I was returning home to an unknown future—as much as it was the taste of the fruit.

Madame farmer turned red herself. She walked around her stall and put her arm around me.

I spent the next half hour learning how to grow the most perfect apricots, about the pruning, the climate, and the orchard that had been with her family for two generations. I purchased more than I could carry, stuffing several into my jacket pocket and feeling weighed down by the plump fruit. I ate all I could in those moments I had before leaving France.

Every August since then, when I'm at a farm stand—almost every day (where else is there to be?)—I'm reminded of the Madame farmer and her apricots. And I don't need to be tasting actual apricots. Blackberries, corn, cranberry beans—they've all become part of summer's flavor adventure.

I have a theory on why a meal built around a trip to the farmers' market tastes so good. There's the physiological explanation: Produce picked in later stages of ripeness (since it doesn't have to travel as far as the supermarket kind) means produce that's more mature and therefore tastier.

There's another explanation, this one emotional. All along the conventional food chain—from seed to farmer to distributor to market—cost is the determining factor. It's no surprise that the food that comes out on the other end is nameless, faceless, and for the most part, flavorless.

But when you visit a farmers' market, you are, to some extent, engaging in a part of agriculture's culture, whether you're shaking the hand of the farmer who grew your produce, learning about a variety of corn or the way it was grown, or just surrounding yourself with people in the single-minded pursuit of good food.

It's what unfolds every morning at the farmers' market—not just food grown in the right way and picked at the perfect time, but food with a story. Even in our most auspicious moments in the kitchen, that's better than any seasoning you or I could provide.

Dan Barber is the executive chef and co-owner of Blue Hill and Blue Hill at Stone Barns, both in New York. He won the 2009 outstanding chef award from the James Beard Foundation.