**Epitaph for a Peach, and for the Sweetness of Summer**

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*David Mas Masumoto farms in the town of Del Rey, outside Fresno.*

The last of my Sun Crest peaches will be dug up this fall. A bulldozer will crawl in, rip each tree from the earth and toss it aside; the sounds of cracking limbs and splitting trunks will echo through my fields. My orchard will topple easily, gobbled up by the power of the diesel engine and metal rake and my acceptance of a fact that is unbelievable but true: No one wants a peach variety with wonderful taste.

Yes, wonderful. Like many of the older fruit varieties, Sun Crest tasted great, like a peach was supposed to. The flesh was so juicy that it oozed down your chin. The nectar exploded in your mouth and tickled you with the message, "aaah, *this* is a peach!" The fragrance enchanted your nose, a natural perfume that could never be captured.

http://articles.latimes.com/images/pixel.gifThe experience of eating a Sun Crest peach automatically triggered a smile and a rush of summer memories and a childlike joy in the simple, savory pleasures of life.

Sun Crest was one of the last remaining truly juicy peaches. When you washed that treasure under a stream of cooling water, your fingertips instinctively searched for the "gushy" side of the fruit. Your mouth watered in anticipation. You leaned over the sink to make sure you wouldn't drip on yourself. Then you sank your teeth into the flesh, a primal act, a sensory celebration that summer had arrived.

My dad planted our orchard 20 years ago, and those trees paid for my college tuition. But stricter and stricter quality standards coupled with a declining demand cut deeply into production levels. Our original 15 acres and 1,500 trees was down to a small patch of 350 this summer.

Every year, produce brokers advised me to get rid of the Sun Crests. "Better peaches have come along," they assured me, "peaches that are redder, fuller in color, with smoother skin--and last for weeks in storage."

"Consumers love the new varieties," the brokers said. "They won't buy Sun Crest."

And my sales returns at the end of each season seemed to verify that. Demand was weak and I had to accept lower prices. But I couldn't give up. I often pictured a shopper picking a Sun Crest out of one of my boxes, not knowing that a good taste was hidden inside like a secret, and then biting into it and saying, "Hey, this actually tastes great! I must have been lucky to get a good one."

So I hung on to those old peach trees for years, rationalizing that it was worth keeping something that had meaning beyond monetary rewards. But this year I became scared. Scared because I couldn't sell my peaches; thousands of boxes blacklisted with a bad reputation sat in cold storage. Boxes that had been paid for, fruit that had cost me and my family a year's labor, a year wasted, unproductive and impotent.

For many family farmers with fruit varieties like Sun Crest peaches, it's now not how much they earn but how much they owe. Can you imagine working an entire year and having your boss inform you that you owed *him* money? No matter what you believe in, you can't farm for very long and be rewarded only with good-tasting peaches.

This season we are seeing not only the death of a peach variety but also the continuing death of the family farmer; the gradual extinction of a breed and a livelihood, a fruit no longer valued and a way of life no longer valid. Along with these perished our window into a world where hard work was honestly rewarding, a labor that truly produced life and gave it a flavor.

http://articles.latimes.com/images/pixel.gifhttp://articles.latimes.com/images/pixel.gifI knew that I would never make a fortune in farming but I hoped that I could be rich in other ways, and maybe, just maybe, my work would create some other kind of wealth in the process.

I will survive. The family farmer is a tough breed and we will find ways to continue. But when I think of that Sun Crest orchard, it hurts to see a slice of our life ripped out, and flavor lost along with meaning. My orchard will yield to the bulldozer and the trees will tumble without a fight. We will set a match to them and listen to the crackling of dry leaves and dead branches engulfed by the rising flames. The cinders, lasting for days, will glow in the chill of the fall night.

I'll come out daily and watch the fire, my face and arms warmed by the heat of the burning wood. Then I'll plow the ashes back into the earth. The ground will be renewed, and I'll hope my next orchard will grow up as rich.

Above is the essay as it originally appeared in print. Later it became the prologue for Masumoto’s book *Epitaph for a Peach*, which also includes this note:

*Frustrated and desperate, I wrote about my peaches and sent the story to the Los Angeles Times. It was published and syndicated across the nation. In the following weeks I received dozens of phone calls and letters, strangers urging me to “keep the last good-tasting peach.” These were city folk who care about the foods they eat and sympathized with my plight. For them, food has meaning beyond mere nourishment. They longed to be connected to farming.*

*The day the bulldozer arrived, I met it out in the fields and stopped it from entering my Sun Crest orchard. I decided to keep those trees for one more harvest.*

*[. . . .]I have been trying to farm a new way, working with, and not against, nature, which always requires a certain risk and willingness to experiment. This year will decide my fate. I can’t afford to dabble in trial and error. This year I commit myself to saving those peaches; if I fail, I will have to admit my failure as a farmer. I break the spring earth with a new resolve to redeem not only one block of peaches but also my chosen life.*

If you want to read the happy story of how the Masumoto family and the Sun Crest peaches are doing now, you can read more on the farm’s Web site: <http://www.masumoto.com/index.htm>

The family farm timeline is particularly interesting: :<http://www.masumoto.com/organic/timeline.htm>