

THIS AND THAT



Cara Cara: My Search for Sweet Winter Fruit

By Rev. Dale C. Whitney

From 1971 to 1989 I served as the pastor of Geneva Presbyterian Church at 3rd and Molino (now the Cambodian Buddhist Temple). In 1989 I moved into a “second career” as the manager of the Harbor Area Farmers’ Markets, sponsored by what is now the South Coast Interfaith Council. We had only Friday and Saturday markets in Long Beach then; our popular Sunday market at Alamitos Bay Marina was added in 1997. I finally retired from the markets in 2016 after 27 years.

Way back when I began my market work in 1989 there was a Letter to the Editor in the *Long Beach Press-Telegram* complaining about the “hard, tasteless fruit” in the supermarkets. I quickly responded with another letter that was also published, recommending that the complainer try the local farmers’ markets. The fruit there is usually picked fresh for the market at peak quality. Commercial farms pick early and it is hard enough to “bounce around on the packing house circuit” for a couple of weeks.

But there is a catch if one is looking for fresh-picked fruit at peak quality in the middle of winter: the farmers in certified farmers’ markets like our local ones can only sell what they

grow stateside here in California (in season unless cold-stored for a short time) and not from anywhere else. Oh yes, those wonderful Fuji apples do very well in cold storage, but they are an exceptional product!

What to do if one has a sweet tooth for fresh fruit at this time of year? Well, there is fruit from the Southern Hemisphere in the supermarkets, but it is bound to be “hard and tasteless” and comes with a very large carbon footprint if it is from Chile, Peru, or New Zealand.

My answer, of course, is Cara Cara, the wonderful citrus fruit that is the focus of this article! Here are some basic facts about the marvelous result of what I would call a double mutation, since the genetic history of the citrus family is very complex.

1. What are they?

They look much like a standard navel orange, but with pink flesh. Their taste is similar, of course, but my palate finds them even sweeter than navels.

2. Where do they come from?

There are at least two parts to the answer, first genetics and then geography.

The basic story is that a Presbyterian missionary in Brazil discovered a “limb sport” (resulting from a natural mutation) in an old orange variety called a Selecta. This mutation evidently yielded the very first navel oranges. This new variety came to the US Department of Agriculture in Washington DC in 1870 and was christened the Washington Navel. By 1873 it was being tested by a local farmer in Riverside, where it flourished in the local climate and became the standard orange grown throughout the southern half of California.

A full century later, in 1976, a “spontaneous bud mutation” (this time in a “common” navel orange tree) occurred in Venezuela at a place called the Cara Cara Hacienda. This was the first of the sweet Cara Cara oranges that are now grown here in southern California. I look forward to these wonderful oranges to help me make it through the cold months of January through April, which just happens to be the Cara Cara’s seasonality. Because 1976 was not that many years ago, not everyone (including people who shop at farmers’ markets regularly) has even heard of these marvelous, tasty treats.

3. Are there other similar types of citrus fruit available that are also in season at this time of year?

Yes, there are: other red or pink-fleshed citrus currently in the farmers’ markets include blood oranges and ruby red grapefruit. For comparison, I have included pictures of these citrus varieties, both cut and uncut, along with a Washington Navel with its familiar yellow flesh.

4. Where are the farmers’ markets in or near the Bluff Heights area?

Bixby Park has markets on Tuesday evenings and Saturdays; Marina Vista Park has a Wednesday night market; and Sunday features the Alamitos Bay Marina market right across the street from the new 2nd & PCH shopping center. All of these markets are year-round.

I hope that you will be on the lookout for these winter citrus varieties and enjoy their delicious flavors as much as I do!

Rev. Dale Whitney was born in Nebraska during WWII and came to California with his father, who was an osteopathic physician, and the rest of their family in 1943. He attended elementary school in the LA area, then junior high and high school in Santa Barbara. He attended Pomona College and San Francisco Theological Seminary and was ordained in 1970 as a Presbyterian minister. He was pastor of Geneva Presbyterian Church in Long Beach from 1971 to 1989 and then was manager of the Harbor Area Farmers’ Markets, a project of the South Coast Interfaith Council, from 1989 to 2016.



Cara Cara Oranges (to left of the apples) at Castellanos Farm booth at Tuesday Bixby Park market.