Jon Rowley has assumed the stance. He’s bent forward at the waist, chin out, mouth wide open—ready to bite into what he considers the best peach on the planet. The stance is all about self-defense—keeping his shirt and pants dry. For Rowley knows the peach will be incredibly juicy and, moreover, amazingly sweet. After driving some two thousand miles in Washington and Oregon in search of the perfect peach, his quest finally ended several years ago, here, in Brentwood, California, at an organic orchard called Frog Hollow Farm.

Like many quests, this one started with a question—a common one lately, as food quality in America has increasingly taken a back seat to mass production. “Why don’t peaches taste like I remember them from childhood?” That’s what customers kept asking the owner of an independent Thriftway supermarket in Seattle where Rowley had an ongoing relationship as a seafood marketing consultant. Why indeed, agreed Rowley, a former Alaskan salmon boat captain turned seafood maven and leader of umami workshops exploring the essence of taste. He wondered: Did a spectacularly succulent peach even exist any more?

“I’m like a little kid when I get curious about things,” he says, explaining he told the Thriftway owner that if he could find a perfect peach, a peach so good it would bring a smile to the lucky eater’s face, he could create a dynamite marketing campaign around it.

Rowley hopped in his car and began visiting orchards, farm stands, and farmers’ markets. At a U-Pick orchard in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, the owner showed him a small device that looked rather like a tiny telescope. The gadget was a refractometer, a commonly used tool in the wine industry. Look through its eyepiece at a drop of juice—from a squeezed grape or a slice of a peach—and you get a brix reading, a precise measurement of the dissolved solids in the juice and a very good sense of the sugar content.

It took Rowley two summers of tasting and brixing peaches, but he finally discovered two western orchards where peaches lived up to their past glory: Pence Orchards in Wapato, Washington, and Frog Hollow, two states southward. At Frog Hollow, Rowley also found a kindred spirit, a former history teacher turned farmer named Al Courchesne, who was already squeezing peach juice onto his own refractometer.

Courchesne, or Farmer Al, as he’s known to his fanatically loyal farmers’ market customers and the chefs and restaurateurs who covet his fruit, planted his first peach trees twenty-seven years ago after uprooting himself. He left Hawaii and a ten-year teaching career at a private school when he realized—from growing vegetables after classes and on weekends in a small market garden and selling them from the back of his pickup—that he loved farming more. Scouting potential farm sites an hour and a half west of San Francisco, Courchesne arrived at thirteen acres of fertile delta land in Brentwood—and heeded every last word of the local farmer who told him: “You buy this ground and plant peaches, you’ll make nothing but money.”

Of course, the money did not come easily. And not overnight. Starting solo, with secondhand equipment, Courchesne did all the work himself, even laying his own irrigation lines. He survived the first few years as a U-Pick operation while he learned his craft, now and again adding on to his holdings. His backyard, as Courchesne likes to call it, now extends past the battered old trailer he has lived in since 1975, forming an irregular quilt of 123 acres in the shadow of California’s Mt. Diablo that he has tended organically since 1989. He has also added a few employees and vehicles and now trucks his fruit and baked goods (made under the supervision of partner Becky Smith, formerly pastry chef at Oliveto in Oakland) to Bay Area Whole Foods stores and farmers’ markets. Courchesne also grows nectarines, pluots (70 percent plum, 30 percent apricot), and cherries, and recently he planted some olive trees. But Frog Hollow Farm is known best for its many varieties of peaches, which prompt praise as glowing as their colorful skins and juicy flesh.

“My knees got weak, they were so sweet,” says chef Rick Moonen, formerly of restaurant rm, recalling his first bite of a Frog Hollow peach. That taste soon transformed Moonen into a small-scale produce dealer, selling out the back door...
of his kitchen to other top Manhattan restaurants like Le Bernardin, The Water Club, and La Cote Basque. Moonen would order 100 or 150 pounds of peaches air freighted to Kennedy Airport and pick them up himself, stashing them in his Audi with the back seats folded down. Driving back into Manhattan, battling the traffic, he’d have one hand on the steering wheel, the other on a fast-disappearing Frog Hollow peach. “Everyone thought I was out of my mind, and it was probably true, but the end result was that my customers were getting the very best peaches.”

At the Ferry Building Farmers’ Market in San Francisco, where Farmer Al personally peddles his stone fruit on Saturday mornings, assisted by a crew of three, you can watch Frog Hollow peaches stop people in their tracks, spread smiles across faces, even turn back the clock as glistening sample slices deliver a beloved taste that many folks of a certain age had given up on ever experiencing again. Perhaps no fruit, tomatoes included, has suffered as much as the peach in the name of modern agriculture and mass production. Happily, growers like Farmer Al have come to the rescue.

A passerby pops a slice in her mouth, starts to resume her canvas of the market, but freezes—and practically yanks her husband’s arm out of its socket. “Barry, try this.” He does and draws out a single word: “Deeeelicious.”

Two new customers head into the Frog Hollow display, where the scale is set at $3.30 per pound. As most of Farmer Al’s peaches easily top a half-pound apiece, many cost more than two dollars each, straight from the farmer. Even so, only a couple of buyers all morning so much as blink an eye. Peach season is fleeting, and guaranteed pleasure on this order is rare. Addicted regulars, like San Francisco resident Rusty Holden, would probably pay twice as much.

“These are the best peaches in the universe,” reaffirms Holden before buying his weekly box. “I eat them with half and half.” Apparently with abandon. “I keep wanting to make a peach pie,” says his wife Roberta, “but we always go through them too fast.”

“Meet the peach of your dreams,” invites a gray-haired man passing out samples, actually summarizing in six words his own two-year quest. The peach pitchman, of course, is Jon Rowley, who has rejoined Farmer Al for some additional research—much of it the open-mouth kind.

“It’s rare to find a supermarket peach, even a farm stand peach, that brixes over 12,” Rowley says, explaining a brix of 13 points to a pretty darned good peach. Frog Hollow peaches routinely attain brix levels of 15 to 18 and sometimes even higher. There’s more to taste, of course, than simply sugar content. Smell plays a big role, so aromatic compounds
figure in. As with tomatoes, acidity also matters. But brix levels, Rowley found, provide a reliable predictor of taste: the higher the brix, the better the peach.

He discovered, too, that not only did Farmer Al know all about brix levels, but Courchesne’s years of experience tending and studying and tasting his own peaches have turned him into the equivalent of a human refractometer. In the Frog Hollow peach orchard he battles Rowley’s refractometer, predicting brix levels with the accuracy of a carnival weight guesser.

“Try this one, Jon,” Farmer Al says, picking a recently fallen peach off the grass, looking it over, pronouncing it a 17, and handing it on. Rowley enjoys a bite, squeezes some juice onto the glass viewing portion of his refractometer, and announces: “Seventeen.”

Farmer Al bends and examines another peach in his hand. “This one’s about 18, maybe,” he says. It brixes just slightly lower, at 17.

“This one’s going over 20.” It does.

Most of us aren’t going to tote around refractometers when choosing peaches. But we can learn from Farmer Al, who points out that traces of green near the stem indicate a peach picked before it has fully ripened. Courchesne also knows his peaches taste best when their skins are just soft to the touch and display a deep, autumnal, golden background color. Look past the red blush, he advises. By scouting local orchards and farmers’ markets, where you can get to know your grower, those tips should help you select better peaches.

“I know that if you eat a peach just after it’s picked—even a dead ripe peach, it’s still going to taste a bit green, more like the tree than the fruit. The best way to handle a peach is to pick it and put it on your kitchen counter and age it for three or four days. Once you pick it, the sugar level is fixed but the acids continue to develop and become more complex and help develop the depth of flavor you want.”

As for spectacular peaches, they’re worth searching for and worth the extra expense, if not for everyday fare, then for special occasions. “If you have the good fortune to taste one 18 brix peach in a lifetime,” says Rowley, “you’ve been blessed.” As with any great food, the best preparations are often the simplest. One of Rowley’s favorite ways of eating Frog Hollow high-brix peaches is to slice them in half, brush them with a little olive oil, and then grill them on a barbecue—first flat side down, then round side down, till they slump in their skins and bubble in their crater like an active volcano. “Close your eyes,” says Rowley. “You’ll think you’re eating peach pie.”

NOTE

Frog Hollow peaches can be ordered by mail from www.froghollow.com.