

# The Oregonian

## Oregon's vanishing strawberry Like the salmon, the fruit is an indicator species of troubled times. But local response may save it

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**Strawberry: - Science explains why Oregon's berries stand out**

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By David Sarasohn, The Oregonian

Nobody ever went to court for Oregon strawberries.

Unlike Northwest salmon, they don't have their own lawyers, a legendary story of swimming upstream to be harvested or a national menu presence.

But like so much of the natural Northwest, the Oregon strawberry is spectacular -- as the Oregon Strawberry Commission slogan explains, "Sweeter. Redder. Simply Better." An Oregon strawberry dessert in an upscale Portland restaurant mingles the old and new Oregon in a single dazzling recipe. The intoxicating Hood and Rainier varieties vanish with the Fourth of July, but the hardier Selvas and Seascapes still sell at the onset of October.

But like so much of the natural Northwest, the Oregon strawberry is endangered. The crop has plummeted from 100 million pounds in 1988 to 32 million last year, according to the Oregon Agricultural Statistics Service. Strawberry acreage harvested peaked at 18,300 in 1957, dropping to 3,000 in 2002 and just 2,300 this year.

Land, labor and competitive pressures are crushing Oregon strawberries like a bartender making a margarita. If they vanish, or just fade to a strawberry stain, something central to Oregon will have disappeared. For decades, Oregon strawberries have been part of the local culture, a perfumed power demonstrating the unfathomable richness of the Willamette Valley soil.

Just as the salmon are the Northwest's seagoing sustainability symbol, the Oregon strawberry is the area's land-based identity challenge, a taste test of whether the berry, like the land it springs from, will end up being just too good for us. The planning grail that has absorbed Oregon for the past four decades -- the promise that you can balance everything and lose nothing -- would vanish in a final end of strawberry season.

"It's legitimate to say they're an indicator species of the challenge farmers face in a commodity economy where the least expensive win," says Scott Exo, executive director of the Food Alliance, a Portland group encouraging environmentally friendly and socially responsible practices.

But Exo insists that what the market has cut back, a different kind of buyer can revive. "I'm pretty upbeat," he says. "Farms are seeing that reorienting themselves to the market on the basis of questions other than price is viable." **Finicky but irreplaceable**

Oregon strawberries, notably the utterly sweet Hoods and Rainiers, don't last and, like many other Oregonians, don't travel. Totems, the largest part of the crop, have always been targeted for processing, and some Oregon farmers say new food additives and sugars allow food makers to replace them with cheaper California berries.

Other berries can be picked mechanically; so far, Oregon strawberries can't. Oregon weather is legendarily unpredictable; a rainy May or June can turn a strawberry field into a red wound.

But considered in whipped cream instead of in agricultural economics, Oregon strawberries happen to be dazzling.

After a six-year search in the 1960s, upscale ice-cream maker Haagen-Dazs has bought all its strawberries in Oregon -- these days, about one-fifth of the local crop. For decades, Oregon bakers have made strawberry shortcake the official dessert of June. Oregon schoolkids once picked the berries to buy bikes and books.

Now, June is no longer identifiable by red fingerprints.

Throughout the summer, and in many places deep into the fall, Oregon farmers markets symbolize the prospect of strawberry survival. This year's record-high 68 markets can't maintain the Oregon strawberry crop by themselves, but they help bolster a berry on the edge.

"I probably wouldn't be raising them if it wasn't for the markets," says Matt Unger of Unger Farms in Cornelius, who's been farming since 1977 on land in his family since 1940. "It seems like Oregonians like to buy local."

And they give Oregonians a chance to eat a spectacular strawberry -- and to note just how remarkable it is.

"The collective consciousness of Oregonians about their strawberries is kind of interesting," says Greg Higgins of Portland's Higgins restaurant. "People are proud of them, saying they might not look like much but they taste better than strawberries from anyplace else."

### **Science of strawberries**

You can see his point. An Oregon strawberry is red all the way through, and it can make your average California or Chilean strawberry seem like a cotton ball spray-painted crimson.

There's a reason why, each June, large parts of the state have sudden red outbreaks of strawberry stands, like metropolitan measles, and why for a few flashing weeks strawberries explode across the state's dessert trays.

Moreover, this is not just Northwestern boosterism. This is science.

As Michael Qian of Oregon State University has demonstrated, Oregon strawberries are higher in anthocyanins, making them redder, and aromatic compounds, making them tastier, than mass-production strawberries from other places. Oregon's cool spring nights cut down on berry respiration, meaning local strawberries don't lose sugar overnight like those in more southerly climates.

California berries are hardier, cheaper to raise and produce for a longer part of the year. Foreign berries have an unapproachable cost advantage. Oregon strawberries can win a tasting contest, but they have problems in a bidding war -- and they're in several. **The local solution**

Besides battles with cheaper, more resilient strawberries and berries that can be harvested by hand, Oregon strawberries are in a literal turf war. The land that grows the best strawberries also grows subdivisions.

"Traditionally, strawberries have been grown around urban areas, and a lot of those fields got developed," says Arne Goddik, who farms near Dayton and serves on the state strawberry commission.

Unless people bid on a different basis.

That's what Philip Gutt, administrator of the Oregon Strawberry Commission, is counting on. "I'd like to believe there are enough Oregonians out there that love Oregon strawberries" to support a market, says Gutt, noting that North Carolina has a healthy local strawberry crop consumed in the local market.

Larry Thompson, of Thompson Farms in Boring, sees a steady decline in the crop -- although, between farmers markets, farm stands and some U-pick business, he's increasing his own strawberry acreage. The only props he sees for the crop are the fresh markets -- which could thrive with a rising local willingness to focus on Oregon produce and Oregon harvest seasons.

"Maybe we don't need to be eating strawberries in January and February," Thompson says. "Maybe we should be eating seasonally." **Strawberry symbolism**

The Oregon strawberry, it seems, is not simply a fruit, or even a particularly spectacular fruit. It's also a high-anthocyanin symbol of the choices facing this state.

Oregon has cherished the idea, and insisted on the possibility, of enlarging its identity while maintaining its roots, of embracing both a strawberry harvest and growing cities. If there is a way to overcome a crunching and swiftly changing economy, a berry of delicate habits and spectacular quality -- and a truly beaverlike Oregon identity -- could be the place to make a stand.

The survival struggle of the berry that has colored Oregon summers for decades adds another flavor to the challenge critic Lewis Mumford launched at the Portland City Club in 1938:

"You have here a basis for civilization on its highest scale, and I am going to ask you a question which you may not like: Are you good enough to have this country in your possession?"

Mumford's question has been asked, and echoed, for two-thirds of a century.

In this case, it comes with a strawberry on top.

Because even in the Northwest, man does not live by salmon alone.

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