

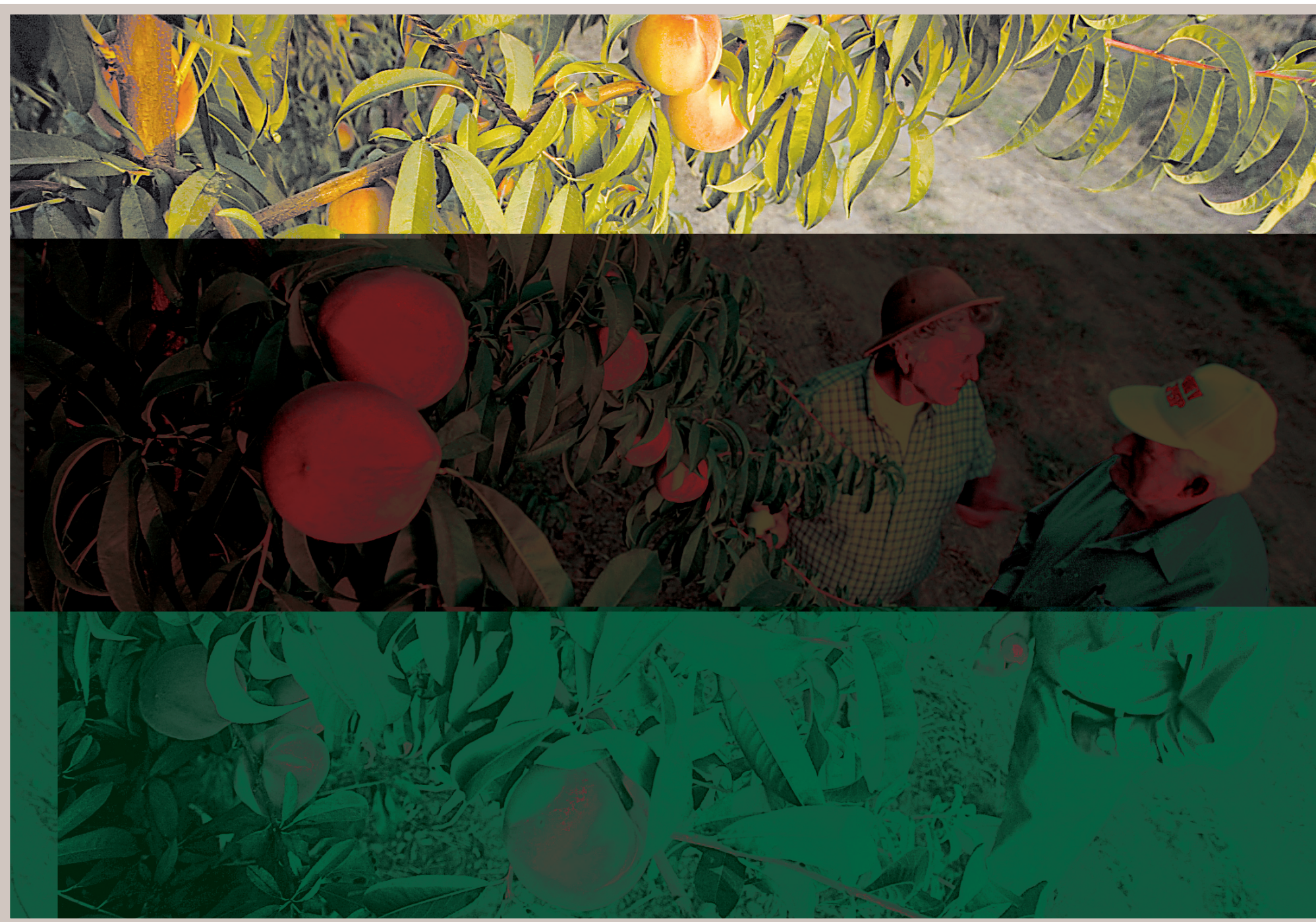
Los Angeles Times
FOOD

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Cooking
Restaurants
Wine & Spirits

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DELECTABLE PASSION: A white peach tree frames Fitz Kelly, left, and Art Lange as they philosophize about — what else? — peaches in Kelly's grove in Reedley, in the Central Valley. BRYAN CHAN Los Angeles Times

The orchard masters

Fitz Kelly and Art Lange grow the kind of fruit that most of us just dream about.

By **RUSS PARSONS**
Times Staff Writer

BITE into one of Fitz Kelly's Lady in Red peaches and the flavor is enough to make you gasp.

The first impression is of powerful syrupy sweetness. Then comes a tart tang that gives the sugar some backbone. Overriding everything is a mix of complex flavors, both floral and fruity, so mouth-filling they seem almost meaty. The fruit is so ripe the juices drip down your chin; so ripe a peach practically peels itself. Much the same could be said for Art Lange's Snow Queen white nectarines.

These days, when we consider ourselves lucky to get fruit that is simply sweet, it's easy to forget that something as basic as a peach or a nectarine can actually have the power to shock.

To get fruit like that is no accident of nature. It takes a gifted farmer, a lot of hard work and a refusal to compromise.

For more than a decade, Kelly and Lange, good friends who farm within a couple of miles of each other just south of Fresno, have held down opposite ends of Arizona. [See Fruit, Page F5]

Peach primer

The California Cook: Choosing the best stone fruit — and then making the most of it. **Page 4**

Grow your own: How to care for trees. **Page 5**

MEDIA DISH

Just a gigantic rumble in the belly?

The culinary world shakes it head over the growing influence of food TV.

By **CORIE BROWN**
Times Staff Writer

THIS week, Rachael Ray enters the pantheon of America's highest-paid cookbook authors, signing a multimillion-dollar,

multibook deal that is one of the largest in cookbook history.

Ray is a food television phenomenon. A perky 35-year-old home cook with no professional credentials, she has such good chemistry with the camera that her "30 Minute Meals" is the Food Network's top-rated show. It's particularly appealing to Madison Avenue's favored demographic, the impressionable younger adult, age 18 to 49. [See Shows, Page F2]



LAWRENCE K. HO Los Angeles Times
A CLASSIC: Gin fizz.

The long and cool of it

By **DAVID LANSING**
Special to The Times

IT is a scorchingly hot day in Las Vegas as I retreat inside Desert Passage, a faux-casbah mall inside the Aladdin resort. Hot and sticky, I agree to let a pedicab driver whisk me past life-size stone elephants and a sultan's palace decorated with iridescent mosaic tile in my search for a quenching cocktail on this steamy summer afternoon. My driver assures me he knows just the place. Moments later, we arrive at a daiquiri bar whose main feature is a wall of Slurpee machines turning out an array of alcoholic snow cones offered in a ghastly lineup of flavors: hurricane, mar-

garita, bellini, piña colada and so forth.

My pedicab driver pedals off, quite pleased with himself. I, however, am appalled. I watch as two women in shorts and sarong-style tops order sickly sweet mango "daiquiris" in 36-ounce glasses that look like chem class beakers. Papa, I think to myself, would turn over in his grave.

Papa, of course, is Ernest Hemingway, the dyspeptic novelist who loved nothing more than to while away an afternoon at the Floridita bar in old Havana, relishing the daiquiris made with plantation lemons, cane sugar, rum and shaved ice. Not too much sugar, Hemingway would instruct the old bartender, Constante. "It should have a sour finish — like life." [See Cocktails, Page F6]



COOKING
Beautiful bites

What's being passed at groovy gatherings this summer? Canapés with flair. The best part is they're easy to assemble. **Page 3**

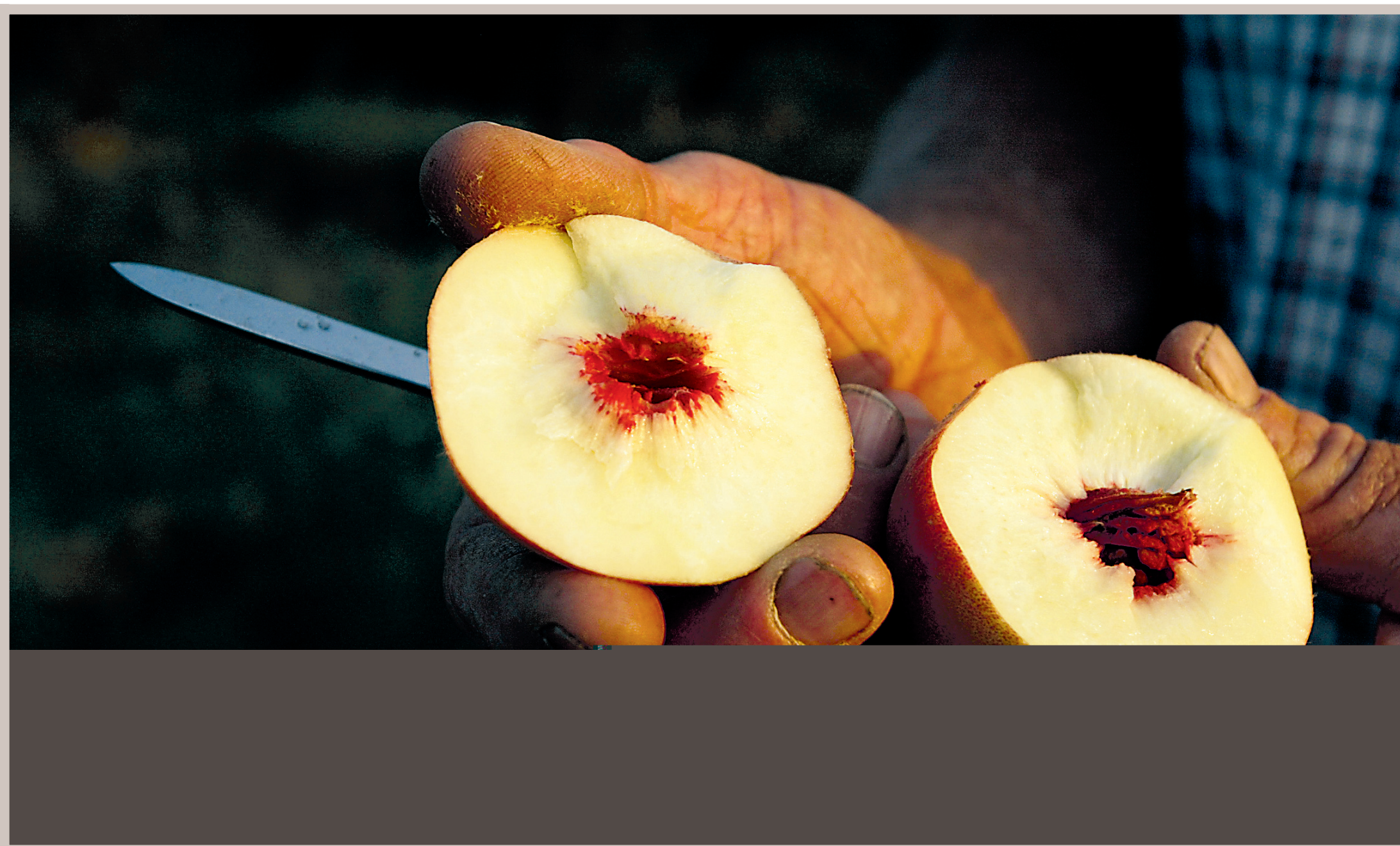
THE REVIEW
Rebirth in Venice

S. Irene Virbila visits Piccolo Cipriani, a convincingly Italian spot in the space once known as 5 Dudley. **Page 7**



MATTERS OF TASTE
London calling

If you can't swing that around-the-world gastro-tour this year, consider this... **Page 7**



Photographs by BRYAN CHAN Los Angeles Times

INTENSE: Kelly reveals the inside of a Snow Princess peach. Kelly and Lange were among the first farmers to concentrate on white-fleshed fruit. "We do a lot of discussing of fruit varieties," Lange says.

Luscious fruit — as it was meant to be

[Fruit, from Page F1]

Avenue at the Wednesday Santa Monica Farmer's Market.

They are far from the only farmers with stone fruit at the market, and they're certainly not the only ones with good fruit. Market regulars rank Burkart Farms, Tenerelli Orchards and Regier Farms along with Kelly's Fitzgerald's Premium Ripe Tree Fruit and Lange's Honey Crisp Farms.

The thing that makes the two different from most other farmers is that they've been growing such amazing fruit for so long that they have come to embody what great farming is all about. They remind us that growing food can be every bit the work of art that cooking it can be.

'They're like little gems'

OTHER growers have customers; Kelly and Lange have apostles.

Spago pastry chef Sherry Yard, who cultivates farmers the way the Medicis nurtured painters, is one of their most ardent admirers. She can buy from anybody on the planet, but her peaches and nectarines come only from Lange or Kelly.

"Their fruit is so fantastic," she says. "Each piece is treated with such reverence. They're like little gems. When you see the love that goes into everything, you can taste it. The fruit is so perfect by itself that the most important thing to me is to make sure I use it with the same integrity with which it was grown."

Kelly, 58, is a loquacious, good-looking guy, with an impressive head of wavy silver hair and a bluff, Irish charm. Picture a younger, healthier Teddy Kennedy with a farmer tan, perpetually clad in khakis and a faded work shirt.

As he bangs around the 20-acre main orchard he's owned for more than 30 years in a beat-up four-wheel-drive convertible, he can't stop talking about the things that please him about it, whether it's the lineage of an odd fruit tree or the red-tailed hawks and great horned owls that live in the eucalyptus island at the center of his property. He also farms an additional 15 acres just down the road.

He stops to snag a low-hanging white peach off a tree limb. It's so sweet it almost tastes like a sugar cube. "Wow, we've got to test that one," he says and slams back to his packing shed to pick up his refractometer — a device that measures sugar content. It's the same tool winemakers use to tell when grapes are ripe enough to make great wine.

This particular peach maxes the meter at 23% (good commercial fruit will average 11% to 12%; anything over 18%, peach marketer Jon Rowley says, "almost goes beyond the human threshold for pleasure"). Fitz looks pleased and tells about a peach he once tested that posted 30%.

Don't ask him about the variety, however. At least not if you want a straight answer. Kelly grows about 145 varieties of peaches and nectarines and calls almost none of them by their proper names. He loves to make up fanciful monikers. The Lady



FRAGILE: Ramiro Bernal, left, and Chon Perez prepare peaches for shipment. Unlike many farmers, Kelly, background, and Lange pick their fruit when it is fully ripe.

Juicy, sweet and home-grown

Growing fruit in a 20-acre orchard is quite different from tending a single tree in your backyard, but there are some tricks farmers use that can improve your crop.

Most peach and nectarine trees need to spend between 600 and 900 hours below 45 degrees every winter to produce the best fruit the following summer.

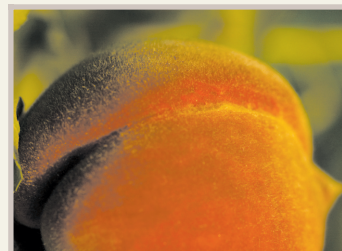
Because of this, almost all the state's commercial orchards are well north of Bakersfield. But there are varieties that have been specifically bred to grow in warm areas. These so-called low-chill stone fruit trees are available at Southern California nurseries in the winter and early spring.

- Plant the tree in an area that doesn't need frequent watering. The moisture requirements of turf grass and peach trees, for example, are almost completely opposite — peaches don't need nearly as much.
- Stop watering two weeks before you harvest.

ing. Some are more aromatic than others or have higher acidity or slightly different shades of flavor.

Some have special characteristics that can only be appreciated by a farmer — they are resistant to certain diseases that may be prevalent in the grower's area. And some are grown for relative ease of handling — many old varieties have fallen from favor because they have a sharp beak at the bottom that frequently breaks during handling, increasing the odds of spoilage. Furthermore, unlike, say, strawberry plants, which bear fruit continuously through a several-month season, peach and nectarine trees are harvested in a one-week to 10-day burst. For a farmer to have fruit all summer, he has to select varieties that will ripen at complementary times.

By comparison with their



PEACHY: The Sierra Lady.

- Don't overfeed your trees.
- Prune the trees from the inside, into a sort of inverted cone shape. Opening the center of the tree allows the maximum sunlight to reach the fruit.
- Thin the fruit in the early spring, allowing roughly one piece every 8 to 10 inches. Sacrificing some of the fruit early will encourage the remainder to grow big and sweet.
- Most important, don't harvest the fruit until it is already beginning to soften. If you want crisp peaches, you might as well go to the grocery store.

— RUSS PARSONS

neighbors, Kelly's and Lange's orchards look downright scruffy. The trees seem to be smaller and the weeds taller. That's fine with them. Big, healthy trees don't necessarily produce the best fruit, they say. Sounding like high-end wine-grape growers, they say they want to stress their trees to concentrate the flavor in the fruit. Lange points out the lush green foliage of his neighbor's trees. "That's really beautiful," he says, "but you can only get that by using a lot of nitrogen, and that makes his fruit taste sour."

Indeed, there's little that can be more stressful for anything than trying to grow in the fine, sandy soil that makes up most of the two's farms. The soil is so nutrient-poor that Kelly jokes he's almost farming hydroponically.

That is one reason — in addition to sheer contrariness — that neither Kelly nor Lange is certified organic (although both use only minimal amounts of chemicals and only when absolutely necessary). Stressed to the edge of survival, these trees need all the help they can get, from time to time and in carefully measured doses.

Fertilizers are fed in minute quantities. Watering is treated almost as an art form, applied abstemiously following a carefully worked out, highly regimented routine (despite being friends and farming practically next door to each other for decades, it was only at a recent dinner that they discovered their "secret" watering techniques were almost identical).

Most of the time, they rely on beneficial insects rather than insecticides — the bad bugs are eaten by better bugs. And those aren't weeds between the trees, but a carefully chosen blend of vetch, peas, barley, wheat, rye and wild oats that add nutrients to the soil.

Lange, a tall man who at 81 is getting a little stooped, bought his 17-acre farm in the early 1970s, when he was at the University of California's nearby Kearney Agricultural Center. A weed scientist by training, Lange must be one of the few farmers at any market with a doctorate in

plant physiology. This tends to give his conversations a professorial air. While Kelly talks birds out of the trees, Lange is a gentleman of a few carefully reasoned, well-chosen words.

The two met when Kelly came to Kearney with a weed problem ("As I recall, it was a prickly question of purple nut sedge or yellow nut sedge," Kelly says). They became closer when the two were among the first farmers to concentrate on white-fleshed fruit. "We do a lot of discussing of fruit varieties; we have a lot of the same ones," Lange says. "He tests a lot and so do I. I guess you could say we're both on the cutting edge of varieties."

It was Lange who recruited Kelly to the Santa Monica market in 1990. He was one of the first farmers there, having started in 1985. Today, he sells at half a dozen markets and runs a mail-order business for fresh and dried fruit. Kelly sells his fruit at Santa Monica's and San Francisco's Ferry Plaza farmers markets and at a few independent grocers in the Bay Area.

It would be practically impossible for either farmer to grow for mainstream markets. To produce enough peaches to satisfy even a single grocery chain takes the pooled fruit of many individual farmers. The distinctive qualities that make Lange's and Kelly's fruit so prized would be lost in the mix.

Ripe harvest

MORE important, their fruit is so ripe when picked that it would never make the jarring trip from orchard to market. Most commercial fruit is picked and dropped into deep buckets, which are then dumped into huge boxes, shipped to sheds where the produce is sorted and packed and finally trucked to wholesale and then retail outlets. That usually means at least a week of handling, little of it gentle. To survive, the fruit must be firm, if not rock-hard.

Kelly and Lange pick their fruit nearly dead ripe, when it has already begun to soften. Lange's goes straight from the tree into a flat lined with a single layer of individual protective cups. When that is filled, it is taken to a truck, where another worker sorts the fruit according to size. That is the last time it is touched until it gets to market.

Picking fruit this ripe entails risks even beyond those associated with packing and handling. For a farmer, every harvest is a race against time, weather and misfortune. Every day the fruit hangs on the tree is another day it might rain or the wind might blow, another day for bugs or birds or some other calamity to find it.

Following the picking crew, the price of this gamble is obvious. Harvesting Lange's famous Snow Queen white nectarines, the workers seem to leave fully half the fruit on the trees as unsalable. Maybe it is too small or it is split (something the variety is prone to do); maybe it's been gnawed by a pest. When the fruit

that does pass muster gets to the truck for sorting, what seems like another half is discarded. The closer inspection turned up a bruise, excessive russeting from the sun, or a spot on the neck where it rubbed against a twig.

The cost is enormous. While the average stone-fruit farmer in California harvests between seven tons and eight tons per acre, Lange and Kelly get only about two tons. This difference could never be recouped through normal commercial channels; it is only by direct marketing that growers can get a premium for a great product.

While peaches and nectarines at many supermarkets can go for less than \$1 a pound and even good farmers market fruit may sell for \$2 a pound, stone fruit grown by these two fetches up to \$6 a pound. And people stand in line to buy it.

Of course, the difference in flavor is enormous as well. It has to be. What Lange and Kelly and others of their ilk see themselves as doing goes beyond growing fruit. They believe they're rescuing the very idea of great flavor from the blinding effects of modern farming.

Ask Kelly about a commercial peach and he goes practically apoplectic: "You know, I'll tell you the truth. The tomato has always been the example of what people hate about modern farming — they remember it tasting so great and it doesn't taste like anything anymore. I honestly think the peach is going to be in that league too."

"All of these factory farmers, they've got an awful lot of facts. They can tell you how many hours of sunlight a peach needs. And they do everything by the rules. But their fruit doesn't have any flavor."

By now he's nearly sputtering: "The question I always want to ask them is: 'Would you eat that, Mr. Farmer?' If the answer is no, then why do they think Harry Housewife would? Why would you want to pay for something that doesn't taste like anything?"

For Kelly and Lange, flavor is the reason for everything they do in the orchard. And by selling at farmers markets, they are able to reap the rewards — at least the emotional ones.

Handing out samples one gray summer morning, Kelly beams at the customers' reaction. "For me, there really is nothing like really nailing a flavor, and I have to say after 30 years, I'm getting pretty darned good at it."

"There's a lot of satisfaction in setting a really high bar and then exceeding it — making people admit they've never had that kind of flavor before."

Fitzgerald's Premium Ripe Tree Fruit is available at the Wednesday Santa Monica Farmer's Market. Honey Crisp Farmer's fruit is available at the Wednesday Santa Monica Farmer's Market, and the Sunday Farmers markets in Beverly Hills and Encino, or on the web at www.honeycrispfarm.com.