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# MUSCATINE MELONS: IOWA'S SUMMER TRADITION

BY SUE FUTRELL

It looks like this will be a good year for Muscatine melons. That's happy news for farmer John Kiwala, especially since a tornado missed his melon field in Muscatine by just 100 yards on June 1. The twister tore through his sweet corn, ripped up irrigation equipment, and flattened over two-dozen homes in the area. John and his wife Holly operate Hoopes' Melon Shed, one of the oldest farm markets in southeast Iowa.

The promising season is also good news for anyone who knows that melons from this part of Iowa have a well-deserved reputation for being the sweetest, best-tasting melons of summer. At one time, the golden, fragrant melons could be found at roadside stands at almost every farm, or sold from the back of pick-up trucks throughout the state. Today, for a few sweet weeks each summer, Muscatine melons can still be found at farmers markets and grocery stores around eastern Iowa.

The sandy soil near the Mississippi River south of Muscatine is ideal for fruit and vegetable production. Once called "the garden spot of Iowa" this truck-farming region has produced a wide variety of fruit and vegetable crops for over 150 years. Muscatine County growers raise lots of watermelon as well, but the melon that bears its name is the muskmelon, or cantaloupe. Despite the similar sounding names, the muskmelon is not named after Muscatine, but rather for its sweet, musky fragrance.

A unique micro-climate created in part by a bend in the river gives the county a warmer, longer growing season than most of the rest of the state. The groundwater is very close to the surface, making it accessible for irrigation, and the coarse, sandy glacial soil drains well while absorbing heat that helps the melons ripen in the field. Melon season starts in mid-to-late July. Harvesting

is all done by hand, and the peak season lasts only a few weeks.

Muscatine Island, a sandy stretch of Mississippi borderland with the small town of Fruitland at its center, is one of two primary melon-producing areas in Muscatine County. The other is along the Cedar River around the town of Conesville, where the soil is also very sandy and well suited to melon and vegetable production.

Muskmelon or *Cucumis melo*, as a species includes cantaloupe, honeydew, Crenshaw and other varieties. The terms cantaloupe and muskmelon are often used interchangeably in the US. However, true cantaloupe, more often grown in Europe and the Middle East, are smooth-skinned, smaller and harder.

Muskmelons sold in the US tend to be of two main types. The most common are small, round and firm, without obvious ridges. These melons are often picked before fully ripe and shipped long distances, and these days they're in stores almost year-round.

Muscatine melons differ from their cantaloupe, honeydew, and Crenshaw cousins in that they are characterized by pronounced ridges, deep orange color, and juicy, fragrant flesh. They tend to have softer flesh, ripen best on the vine, and are usually marketed close to where they are grown. Because of their soft flesh when fully ripe, Iowans sometimes called them "mush" melons.

Melons in Iowa were first grown in home gardens, brought by settlers from the eastern US and immigrants, many German. Historically, gardeners and farmers in the area planted their own open-pollinated seed, saved from year to year. As commercial production expanded and new disease-resistant varieties were developed, most growers shifted to hybrid varieties. Today regional differences in varieties are beginning to disappear, but

the special soil and growing conditions in Muscatine County still give the melons their unique flavor and quality.

Commercial development of truck farming began here in 1874, when William Henry Hoopes (a family ancestor of John and Holly Kiwala), originator of wholesale gardening on Muscatine Island—founded a fruit market and began producing fruits and vegetables for export. Soon there were train cars full of melons and other produce being shipped to big city markets in Chicago and beyond.

The number of melon growers in Muscatine County has declined significantly in recent years. There



Crates of melons at depot, Aug. 16, 1920..

Image from the Oscar Grossheim Collection, provided courtesy of Musser Public Library, Muscatine, Iowa.

are approximately a dozen commercial melon growers left with perhaps another ten or twenty raising smaller quantities. Vince Lawson, farm manager of the Muscatine Island Growers Association Research farm, remembers there were three times as many growers when he came to the area twenty years ago.

Many of those who remain are families who have been raising melons for many generations. Growers can name most of their fellow melon producers, and list off the names of those no longer in the business. As one grower puts it, they stay in it “for the way of life, not the livelihood.”

With exceptional flavor, great growing conditions, and a reputation for quality, why are there so few melon farms left? Consolidation in the retail grocery industry makes it harder for small producers to find buyers, and disappearance of peddlers and small distributors makes it harder to get their produce to consumers. “People used to drive out to the farms to buy produce, and they don’t want to do that anymore,” say several of the growers. Difficulty finding seasonal labor is another challenge. Costs, including soil and pest management, bees for pollination, harvesting, handling and special requirements of retail buyers, such as stickers and bins, have gone up faster than prices.

Despite these challenges, nothing signals summer in Iowa quite like a ripe, juicy slice of Muscatine melon, still warm from the sun. Old-timers might add a pinch of salt, or a pinch of sugar.

A sprinkling of lime juice and chopped mint makes a perfect salad. But if you are lucky enough to buy your melon fresh from the field, off the back of a pick-up truck and still warm from the sun, treat yourself to the full Muscatine melon flavor with nothing added. You’ll be tasting part of an Iowa tradition, and helping to make sure that Muscatine melons don’t become just a memory.

#### WHERE TO FIND THEM

One of the best places to find Muscatine melons is in season at area farmers markets. Or get them at one of the market stands along Highway 61 between Muscatine and Fruitland, on in Conesville. Two of the longest-standing roadside markets along Hwy 61 are Hoopes’ Melon Shed, and Schmidt’s Farm Market, which claims to be the oldest market stand in Iowa. Schmidt’s also operates a restaurant that features local produce in season and is known for its homemade pies. Always call ahead to make sure they are open.

Hoopes’ Melon Shed  
Hwy 61 South  
Muscatine 52761  
563.263.7302

Schmidt’s Farm Market  
5900 Grandview Ave.  
Muscatine 52761  
563.263.6331

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