



# High Ground Organics Community Supported Agriculture

Week 20, July 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017

## Auction Day, by Stephen Pedersen

One of the truest things my Uncle Jerry ever said was shortly after we bought our home farm back in May of 2000. “The one thing about living on a farm is that you are always surrounded by your work.” So when the notice for a fairly promising auction to be held in the west side San Joaquin Valley came in the mail one day late in the summer 2010, I was ready for an excuse to get off the farm--if even for just one day.

I have gotten some really good equipment at great prices at auctions over the years. At an auction in Salinas a number of years ago I bought a Bee-Gee scraper, and a good ring-roller. The year before in Castroville I bought a really nice off-set disc and a couple of pallets worth of tool bar clamps and cultivating knives. I even bought our first CSA delivery truck, a 1970 Ford F350 with a twelve foot box, “arm-strong” steering, and the turning radius of an aircraft carrier, at an auction in Tulare.

What made this auction promising was that they listed a number of implements set up for 60” beds—something one rarely finds at auctions here along the coast. They also listed a huge number of 3” aluminum irrigation pipes (11,000 joints), which we could use. It didn’t hurt that it was to be held near Huron, in the west San Joaquin, and would give me an excuse to take one of my favorite roads in the state—Hwy 198.

After staying up late to rewire the lights and to re-pack the bearings on my equipment trailer—something I only take to the more promising auctions—I headed out early the next morning and was at the Hwy 198 exit off of Hwy 101 before day-break. Between San Lucas and Coalinga, this stretch of highway begins and ends in barren, low hills, covered in golden-brown stubble. As one gains altitude, shrubs and trees appear in increasing numbers until you arrive at the lovely Priest Valley—surrounded by multi-trunked grey pines and valley oaks. This is the land of pipe fences, range cattle, Aermotor windmills—some still functioning--and flocks of black and white magpies sometimes twenty or thirty strong.

When I first decided to make farming my vocation, it was a place very much like Priest Valley that I had in mind for my farm to be— remote and quiet, with fields set in a small valley, framed by trees. That was before it dawned on me that in order to make living selling vegetables there needed to be someone to buy them at least somewhat nearby. Not to mention the impracticality of having to drive an hour and a

half just to get the necessary supplies, like boxes, twist ties, and tractor and irrigation parts, that we rely on to keep the farm running.

In Coalinga I stopped for a fine plate of machaca with rice and beans at the Repollito (little cabbage) restaurant. From my seat I had a good view of the Joaquin ridge to the Northeast of town, where Joaquin Murrieta, the notorious Mexican born outlaw, was supposedly gunned down in 1853. Although many suspected that the Rangers who shot him got the wrong man, that didn’t stop them from severing his head, putting it in a bottle with alcohol, and taking it on tour—charging people a dollar each to see it.

After breakfast I continued east on 198, past I-5 and into the west valley. Witnessing the scale of agriculture in the Western San Joaquin is to alter your frame of reference as to what a farm is. Mile after mile of cotton, processing tomatoes and pistachio trees. It is humbling to think that my entire farm would fit neatly into the corner of one of these fields. After less than ten seconds at 60 MPH you would be looking at it through the rearview mirror.

In time I came to a large field of romaine lettuce, looking somewhat out of place among the more traditional valley crops. Some time ago the large lettuce growers from the Salinas valley discovered that they could grow lettuce here at times when there was very little competition from other growing regions throughout the country. I once spoke with a fellow who worked for Tanamura and Antle, one of the largest vegetable growers on the planet, who told me that when the owners of that company first bought a large parcel in Huron, the price of lettuce shot up over \$25.00 a case and the property paid for itself with a single crop.

The auction itself turned out to be something of a bust. As people who frequent auctions will tell you, how good an auction turns out all depends on who turns up for it.

The best auctions I’ve been to are the ones that were sparsely attended. Not so good are the ones with big crowds and lots of hot-shots with deep pockets. These auctions become a sort of macho spectacle where the auctioneer skillfully plays two or more bidders against each other and the price goes higher and higher—that’s the type of auction this was. Most of the “60 inch” implements actually turned out to be 80 inch equipment that was brought over from a farm on the coast and all of the irrigation pipe went for over \$40 a joint to an internet buyer (the auctioneer works out of a very tall converted camper shell on the back of a pickup truck that drives from lot to lot. It has

## In The Box

Strawberries

Spinach

Cauliflower, Romanesco,  
OR Broccoli

Red Russian Kale

Cilantro

Mixed Summer Squash

Padron Peppers\* OR  
Mixed Cherry Tomatoes\*

Green Onions

*All produce is certified organic.  
Padron peppers are from  
Groudswell Farm. Tomatoes are  
from Mariquita Farm. All other  
vegetables and fruit were grown by  
High Ground Organics. Note: last  
minute substitutions may be made.*

a wireless connection allowing them to simultaneously take bids from people over the internet).

Instead of taking Hwy 198 back home, I drove through the oilfields north of Coalinga and got onto Los Gatos Creek or “Coalinga” road. This was probably the first road between King City and Coalinga and it is incredibly remote and windy. It is also where the DC3 carrying the deportees that Woody Guthrie immortalized in song went down on January 28th, 1948—my Dad’s fifteenth birthday.

The sky plane caught fire over Los Gatos Canyon,  
A fireball of lightning, and shook all our hills,  
Who are all these friends, all scattered like dry leaves?  
The radio says, “They are just deportees”

The bodies of the twenty eight migrant workers who died in the plane crash were taken to Fresno and buried in a mass grave. It was considered one of the worst disasters in the short history of aviation up to that time.

I returned home up Hwy 25 through Hollister in time for dinner. Even though the auction didn’t turn out as I had hoped, sometimes, when the work around me gets overbearing, a change of scenery has a way of putting everything in its proper perspective.

[Note: this article was originally published in 2010.]

## Veggie Notes, by Jason Johnson

Always rinse produce before use. Everything should be refrigerated.

A trick I tried yesterday was roasting **cherry tomatoes**, and I can’t recommend it enough. It is as simple as preheating an oven to 350, tossing the tomatoes in a bit of salt and oil, then roasting them for about 45 minutes. The result is a slightly charred, slightly dehydrated base for all sorts of things. While mine was in the oven, I whipped together a **cilantro** pesto with 1 bunch **cilantro**, 1 clove garlic, ½ a seeded jalapeño, a few almonds, and those **green onions**. I like to roughly chop the **cilantro**, almonds, and **green onions**, then mince the jalapeño and garlic. Combine, salt, and coat with olive oil. When the **tomatoes** are done, take them out and let them cool before combining them with the pesto. Make sure to be very gentle, the **tomatoes** will fall right apart. Salt and pepper to taste. If you find you want more flavor, try a splash of apple cider vinegar.

Set your bowl of roasted Pico de Gallo out of the way, but don’t refrigerate. Grab a mixing bowl and combine two eggs with a cup of milk. On a separate plate, combine a cup of breadcrumbs with some salt and pepper. Chop your **romanesco** or **cauliflower** in to steaks, dip in the egg mix, then roll in the breadcrumbs before adding it to an oiled skillet at medium heat. Brown both sides. When these are done, plate and top with your Pico de Gallo. Garnish with any left-over **cilantro** and **green onion**.

If you didn’t get tomatoes this week, then you are lucky enough to get some of the first **padrons** of the season. I have written about my affinity for these little guys before, but let me reiterate. I LOVE **padrons**. They are a tiny little adventure on a plate. Although very mild, one in every ten or so can be exceedingly spicy. I prepare mine simply. Lightly oil a pan, and get it nice and hot. Medium high. Add the **peppers** whole, salt liberally, and char on two sides. If anyone is in the

kitchen with you, make sure to shake the pan a lot and inform them that **Padron** is actually a municipality in northern Spain. When you are done, empty the peppers into a colander and shake out any excess oil. I like to plate mine on a cutting board so any oil is absorbed, keeping them nice and crisp. Salt again if still bitter and garnish with lemon slices.

If you find yourself without **tomatoes**, you can still make the Pico de Gallo recipe above, substituting **summer squash** for the tomatoes. Just quarter the **squash** lengthwise then chop into ½ inch pieces. Sauté in a lightly oiled pan until soft but not mushy. You might want to do this on a higher heat than normal to get some of the charred flavor the tomatoes would bring. You could also char the **green onions** in a dry skillet if you were feeling adventurous. Whatever the case, though, make sure you let any cooked items cool before adding them to the **cilantro**. Nothing worse than wilted **cilantro**.

Enjoy your veggies!

## Marinated Cauliflower and Padron Skewers “Tapas”, from Chef Andrew E Cohen

3 cups cauliflower florets, trimmed to ¾ x 1 x ½ inch, (stem to outer edge, top to bottom, width of slice) stem part left intact to hold floret together	3 cups padron peppers
Olive oil as needed	½ cup sherry vinegar
¼ tsp. pimenton de la vera dulce (smoked sweet paprika)	½ tsp. dried marjoram or oregano
Salt to taste, preferably something with large crystals such as Maldon, Fleur de Sel de Camargue, Diamond Crystal kosher	Pepper to taste

Whisk the pimenton into the sherry vinegar. Allow it to rest 5-10 minutes so the flavors marry.

Steam or blanch the cauliflower in salted water until it just loses its raw quality and is just tender. It should still have a little crunch to it, but not taste raw. As soon as it reaches this state, give it a quick rinse in cold water to cool it a little, then put it into a non-reactive bowl and drizzle with the vinegar. Toss the florets to coat with the vinegar. Allow to marinate, gently turning every so often, for ½ an hour or so.

After the vinegar soaks in, drizzle with enough vinegar to coat and toss to ensure all surfaces are coated. Season with pepper and scatter evenly with the herbs.

Coat padrons lightly with oil.

Use a sharp small gauge metal or bamboo skewer and thread the peppers and cauliflower florets onto the skewers. Arrange the stems of the padrons so they are all even with one another, and will lie flat on the grill. Between the padrons, thread a piece of cauliflower so the ½ inch dimension is parallel with the sides of the peppers and 1 inch dimension follows the length of the peppers.

Heat the grill until quite hot, and brush it down really well. Put a little oil on a piece of cloth and rub the grate down to aid in the skewers releasing. Lay the skewers onto the grill and cook until the peppers are blistered/charred and the cauliflower is golden with stripes of caramelization/charring on one side. Turn and repeat. Remove to a platter and scatter lightly with salt. Serve hot. Serves: 4