

Roots & Sprouts

News and Ideas from the Belmont Farmers' Market

summer 2009

www.belmontfarmersmarket.org



Open rain or shine!

**Thursday afternoons
1:30 to 7:00 pm**

BELMONT CENTER

Conveniently located behind the Leonard St. stores – in the municipal parking lot off Cross Street and Channing Road – where it's easy to run . . . walk . . . bike . . . and "SHOP LOCAL" for food and all your other needs!

In this issue . . .

**Belmont's Strawberry Festival
il Casale opens in Belmont Center
Childhood memories of strawberry picking
Creamed Strawberries recipe**

The Belmont Farmers' Market is a member of the Belmont Center Business Association.

The Strawberry Festival Tradition

Belmont's 19th century gala brought folks from near and far

At last strawberry season is here! Accompanied by the arrival and joys of summertime, June is the month when heart-shaped strawberries come to their full ripeness in New England. Strawberries played a special role in Belmont's agrarian era; in fact, Belmont was renowned for its strawberries and flowers in the late 1850s. It's easy to understand why our town seal, which includes a representation of Pomona, goddess of fruits and gardens, suited Belmont's reputation during the late 1800s.

At the time of our town's founding, strawberry festivals were scattered throughout New England. They still exist today in some towns. Agrarian communities have a long tradition of putting on festivals and fairs for all to admire the fruits of their hard labor and to learn from the efforts of their fellow farmers. Preparations for these events often began months in advance and involved the whole community. People traveled to festivals in neighboring and faraway towns in a time when any form of travel was a challenge.

Among historic Belmont documents is a letter written by Harriet Hill, dated April 15, 1934. It has been graciously shared with us by

Sam James, whose family resides in the 1693 Abraham Hill homestead. The letter refers to Belmont's annual Strawberry Festival that officially began in 1859, the year of Belmont's incorporation. Hill's letter captures the effort and ambition of the organizers, and the Festival's gaiety, too. At 2 pm the first ticket holders, admission 25 cents, entered the First Church on Concord Avenue then located where the main Post Office stands today. Many members of the old Belmont families



Belmont's Strawberry Festival in its heyday - a profusion of flowers graced the large tents where Belmontians in their finery enjoyed elaborate displays and contests followed by music and dancing. (Photo, taken by Lyman Underwood in 1909, courtesy of the Belmont Historical Society.)

were there, including Mr. Hovey of Hovey's Seedling (who raised prize-winning strawberries in Belmont and elsewhere), Mr. J. O. Wellington, and J. Willard Hill, to name just a few. The fruit was auctioned, and the highest price paid for a basket of strawberries was \$6.50, a small fortune by today's standards.

(continued on page 4)

Belmont Center Welcomes il Casale

Chef Dante de Magistris cooks rustic Italian while harvesting organic and local



Whenever a new restaurant opens in the Center, it piques community interest and enlivens the dining and shopping scene. No wonder people are flocking to the newest addition: **il Casale**. Chef Dante de Magistris, whose **Restaurant Dante** at the Royal Sonesta Hotel in Cambridge is the epitome of fine Italian dining, opened **il Casale** on April 21 in the old brick firehouse. Clearly Dante wants his new venture to be an integral part of Belmont. On May 9, nearby **Vintages** wine shop, hosted **il Casale's** first major wine dinner with Aldo Vacca, wine-maker of *Produttori del Barbaresco*, a prestigious (and

well-priced) Piedmont wine cooperative. Dante manages the new restaurant with strong assists from his brothers, **Damian** and **Filippo**, and sous-chef **Ryan Rolfsen**. **Roots & Sprouts** recently had the chance to pose some questions to Rolfsen.

Q: How does **il Casale** differ from **Dante**?

A: We're actually very different. **Dante** is more of a new-age neo-Italian fine dining experience, with touches of French and Asian. Here at **il Casale**, we're more rustic Italian. Imagine yourself driving down a back road in Italy and you're getting hungry. You just happen to stop at a little farmhouse selling food. You go in and enjoy a nice long lunch or dinner. Another thing is that **Dante** is more focused on Southern Italian; here we want you to be able to experience Italy as a whole. You can have a carbonara from Rome or an egg-plant from Campania or a bruschetta from Piedmont. In America, you don't often see that sort of thing. Restaurants try to focus on a single area, and they don't get it. We're trying to duplicate the best dishes from many regions: Tuscany, Piedmont, Sardinia.

Are you using a fair number of Massachusetts products?

Definitely. Come October we'll be jarring our own summer tomatoes that are grown organically in western Massachusetts. We'll be making an event out of it. That's when the last tomatoes of the season ripen and are the best for making sauce. Yes, these are San Marzano tomatoes; I forget the farm's name. We get a lot of greens and herbs from La Rossa and

zucchini, summer squash, and microgreens from Eva's Garden, both, I believe, in the southeastern Massachusetts Dartmouth area. Her lettuces and garlic chives are the best I've ever tasted – bright, long-flavored. Eva cultivates her land really well and the flavors are incredible. They really shine in soups and with asparagus.

Do you grow any backyard herbs yourselves?

Sadly, no. I live in Dorchester and Dante is in the North End. Actually, Dante's father, Leon, does at his little place in Vermont. And he supplies us in the spring with ramps and fiddleheads, and in the fall with squashes. When he brings them in, Dante will have them as daily specials.

Do you anticipate any liaisons with Belmont Farmer's Market?

Definitely. I was really excited to know that it would be over in the parking lot and we can check it out. I love using local honeys, for example. Dante tells me there's a guy on Winn Street who keeps bees.

*By Fred Bouchard, a Belmont resident, who writes about jazz for **Downbeat** magazine, wine and spirits for **Beverage Business** magazine, and teaches at Berklee College of Music.*



www.belmontfarmersmarket.org

Belmont Farmers' Market Committee

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2009 Vendors

- **Coutts Specialty Foods** jams, jellies, applesauce, relishes
- **Dick's Market Garden Farm** vegetables, fruits, and plants
- **The Farm School** organic vegetables, fruits, flowers, eggs, grass-fed meat
- **Fiore di Nonno Cheese** handcrafted fresh mozzarella
- **Firenze** artisan gelato and sorbetto
- **Follow the Honey** local raw honeys bottled in beautiful glass
- **Geoff & Drew's** brownies in many varieties
- **Goodies** award-winning, better-than-homemade cookies
- **Hmong Farms at Flats Mentor Farm** fresh produce featuring Asian vegetables
- **Hutchins Farm** certified organic plants, vegetables, herbs, small fruit, and apples
- **Kimball Fruit Farm** vegetables, fruit, fruit pies, honey, and plants
- **Mamadou Bakery** handcrafted breads
- **Nicewicz Family Farm** apples, peaches, plums, berries, vegetables, flowers
- **The Pasta Man** pasta in many different shapes and flavors
- **Sassy River Sauces** savory sauces without the fat
- **Sergi Farm** Belmont's only remaining working farm
- **Shootflying Hill Sauce Co.** dessert sauces
- **Siraco** sharpening knives and garden tools since 1953
- **Stillman's at the Turkey Farm** grass-fed meat and freshly-cut flowers
- **Underwood Greenhouse** potted plants grown in Belmont
- **Waverley Place** flowers, herbs, and perennials grown in Waltham



Check our website's vendor page for information about individual vendors and their frequency at our Market.

Food for Thought

Residents share their passion for fresh food, farmers' markets, and good living

He hardly needs an introduction in Belmont. Leading citizen, former Selectman (1973-1994), and lifelong resident, Walter Flewelling, better known as "Wally," is recognized everywhere he goes.

Not so well known, perhaps, is his connection to Belmont's agrarian past. The son of a Maine farmer, Flewelling grew up here before World War II when there were several large farms in town. In a recent conversation he shared some childhood memories of those farms. At that time, food was freshly picked at peak ripeness and sold at a farm's stand, unlike today when it is usually picked unripe, hauled for thousands of miles, and then wrapped in plastic before its sale in chain supermarkets.

Flewelling remembers a time when children could walk along School Street and happily pick apples and peaches from trees lining the roadside. As a child in the 1940s, he lived in the Payson Park area near the reservoir. At that time the Shaw and Hittinger families' farms were two of the main ones remaining in Belmont. Wally grew up not far from the Shaw Farm, which bordered School, Washington and Grove Streets. He recalled that Shaw and Hittinger farms would bring seasonal produce such as strawberries, beans, corn, carrots, celery and squash to Faneuil Hall Market in Boston where they were considered prized commodities.

Many young boys worked on the farms after school. Through his chum, Phil "Flippy" Hittinger, son of Richard Hittinger, a second generation farmer and owner of Hittinger Farm, Flewelling was able to get a job picking strawberries. The Hittinger Farm, located between School Street and Fresh Pond, south of the Shaw Farm, employed about 20-25 kids. "Hittinger's paid them 25 cents an hour and

all the strawberries they could eat," Flewelling recalls. "The wages were good for a 12-year-old. During wartime anyone 18 or older was drafted so that younger kids were able to get work permits. But, of course, there were limits to how many strawberries you could eat before you began to feel sick!" he notes.

The Hittinger store sold its farm's produce, including fresh and delicious strawberries as well as strawberry and other fruit pies that were baked on the farm. Today there still exists an upright pillar at 450 School Street that marks the long gone entrance to the Hittinger Farm store.

The farm fields provided space for the young boys to form pick-up baseball games after school. Flewelling recounts the Shaw Farm games where the kids from Payson Park School played against those from Burbank. If he ever wanted this activity kept a secret from his mother, who assumed he was studying, such plotting was invariably spoiled when his mother found telltale signs of straw in his clothes and realized that he was not hitting the books, but rather hitting a baseball. At their reunions, Flewelling and his friends still hash over these games and the fun times they had growing up in Belmont during a less hurried time.

After the war ended in 1946, the troops returned home, and a new demand for houses arose. It was at that time that more Belmont acreage, including the Shaw and the Hittinger farms, was sold to developers for house lots. The economy had changed so that centuries-old farming vanished, and Belmont became almost totally "A Town of Homes."

By Laurie Levy, based on an interview with - and many thanks to - Wally Flewelling

(continued from page 1)

By 1863 the event had outgrown its home at the First Church, and it was moved outdoors. The planning committee rented two tents to accommodate the many fruit and flower displays. Again, prizes were given for the baskets of strawberries and floral arrangements, as well as for the largest individual berries. This time the highest prizes were silver goblets. As the afternoon wore on, musicians played and dancing began, with the ladies in attendance clad in the elegant attire of the day. An extra train on the Fitchburg line was chartered to and from Boston, suggesting that Belmontians were not the only revelers in attendance. Extra policemen from Cambridge were on duty to handle the crowds.

Strawberry Festivals became a tradition for decades. The locations changed, but the

events always included the serving of the luscious berries with cream or ice cream.

So fragrant - and they're good for you too!

We all know how unforgettable the strawberry aroma is. Its Latin name, *Fragaria*, refers to this quality. Strawberries are also respected for their nutritional qualities. They are rich in vitamins C and E, beta carotene, and other anti-cancer compounds. One cup - only 50 calories - provides 140% of the recommended daily intake of vitamin C. For best flavor and nutrition, let strawberries ripen on the vine, or buy them from a local farm, because travel reduces their flavor and texture. Insects also like strawberries! Thus, berries are apt to receive heavy pesticide treatment. It's a good idea to know your farmer, or consider

buying organic. Berries should be eaten as soon as possible after picking or purchase, and washed before consuming. For best storage, place in a paper towel in a tightly covered container in the fridge for up to 3 days. After refrigeration, for best flavor, berries should be allowed to come to room temperature before serving. Be sure to handle strawberries gently to prevent bruising.

Now is the time to buy some local strawberries at their peak ripeness, starting with the June opening of the Belmont Farmers' Market!

By Debbie Dobbins

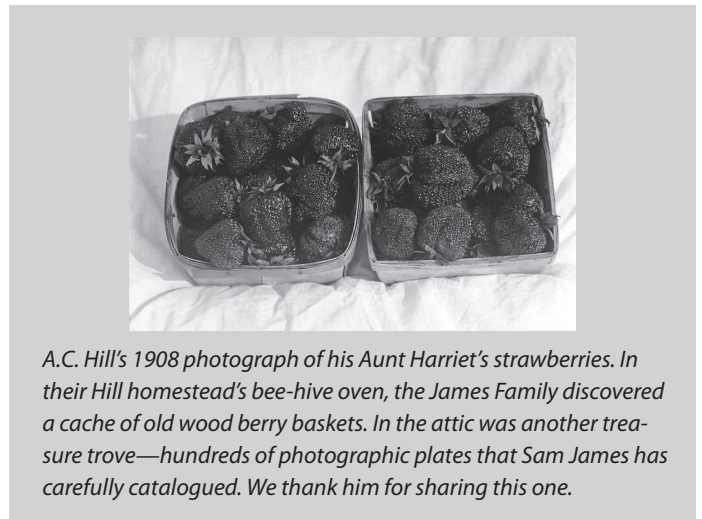
To read a colorful description of Belmont's first Strawberry Festival in 1859, written by Harriet Hill in 1934, see our website.

Beautiful in color, lovely in shape, and unique in taste, freshly picked strawberries are a nutritious superstar. They need little more than a quick rinse (don't allow them to sit in water) before they become a delicious treat any time of day. Small whole or large sliced berries are a wonderful addition atop hot or cold cereal or yogurt for breakfast. Add sliced berries and crumbled feta to greens and top with a sesame or a poppy seed dressing for a light summer salad lunch. And then there is dessert . . .

We turned to Viktoria Haase, Chair of Belmont's Sesquicentennial Committee, for a recipe. She kindly provided us an entire book! We thank her for *Festival of Strawberries* (2nd ed., 1971) from which we selected a recipe written in 1857. It speaks to the cookbook's last line (after 90 pages of strawberry recipes): "On the other hand, we know you just can't improve on fresh strawberries and cream!" Belmont's founding residents would have agreed.

Creamed Strawberries

Take fine large ripe strawberries. Hull or stem them, and set on ice till just before they are wanted. Divide them into saucerfuls. If you have glass saucers, they will make a better show than china. Put some powdered sugar in the bottom of each saucer. Fill with strawberries, and then strew on a liberal allowance of sugar, for American strawberries (however fine in appearance) are seldom sweet. Have ready sufficient whipped cream that has been frothed with rods or with a tin cream-churn. Pile high a portion of the whipt cream on each saucer of berries. Strawberries are sometimes eaten with wine and sugar, if cream is not convenient. With milk they curdle, and are unwholesome, besides tasting poorly.



A.C. Hill's 1908 photograph of his Aunt Harriet's strawberries. In their Hill homestead's bee-hive oven, the James Family discovered a cache of old wood berry baskets. In the attic was another treasure trove—hundreds of photographic plates that Sam James has carefully catalogued. We thank him for sharing this one.

Festival of Strawberries has a unique Belmont connection described in the introduction: "This cookbook was compiled as part of the McLean Hospital Auxiliary Strawberry Festival of 1964. The entire proceeds from its sale go toward helping establish McLean Hospital's first outpatient clinic. The strawberry theme was chosen because the McLean Hospital Auxiliary ends its year with a Strawberry Festival, where the strawberry motif is evident in handwork, decorations and refreshments. The strawberry festival has been prominent through Belmont's history."