



PETE'S TREATS: Jersey's own Pete Napolitano helps NBC viewers appreciate the Garden State's bounty of produce.

EDITORS' PICK

GROWTH STOCK

Produce Pete explains why Jersey produce beats all.

By Susan Bloom

One bite of a ripe Jersey tomato, an ear of sweet local corn or a handful of plump blueberries, and you know why we're called the Garden State. It's no secret to Pete Napolitano. "You could travel the world and never get better produce than in New Jersey," he says.

Napolitano should know. The Jersey born and raised fruit-and-vegetable guru affectionately known as Produce Pete is as authentic as his Bergen County roots and the Garden State produce he proudly promotes. Following years of hard work running Napolitano's Produce, a family business in Bergenfield, this affable Jersey guy has become a local celebrity, known for his enthusiastic Saturday-morning segments on NBC's *Weekend Today in New York*, his role as a print and broadcast spokesman for the A&P family of supermarkets, and his appearances on such shows as *The View*. His goal? To help people better understand the wide world of produce and get the best out of New Jersey's exceptional bounty.

"Of course, people think of tomatoes, blueberries and corn when they think of New Jersey," he says, "but we also grow some really outstanding produce all year round that people might not be as aware of.

Want examples? "Our greens—like arugula, spinach, cabbage, Swiss chard and parsley, which come up in the spring—are second to none."

Naturally, whenever Pete talks produce, he's also quick to offer tips. "The key with these is to look for nice green bunches that still have their roots attached if possible, because they're fresher and will stay longer," he says. "With Jersey's sandy soil, these greens all need to be washed carefully, but to preserve their freshness, don't wash them until they're ready to be used, and if you're cooking with them, they should be the last thing to go in the pot."

Pete also sings the praises of Jersey asparagus, another harbinger of spring. "Asparagus is part of the lily family and should have a nice fresh scent on top," he says. "It's best to store asparagus standing up in a little water in the fridge so they'll keep longer and to steam them standing up as well to keep their tops from getting mushy."

As for Jersey's renowned summer crops—tomatoes, corn, blueberries and peaches—Pete also has some trade secrets he's learned along the way. "It's not the soil or the sun that ripens tomatoes, it's the moon," he explains. "The longer you leave tomatoes on the vine and let them mature through full-moon cycles, the sweeter they'll be. That's the trick."

Pete also points out some of Jersey's less-obvious summer treasures, including peppers, sugar-baby watermelons, nectarines, cucumbers and eggplants. "Look for heavy eggplants that have a nice pur-

ple color and spikes on top," he says. "You also want to ensure they're not spongy. If you press your thumb against an eggplant and it leaves an indent, that means it's getting older and isn't as fresh."

Looking ahead to the fall, Pete raves about Jersey collard greens, squash, turnips and cranberries, which are one of the state's key crops and which Pete recommends be selected "when they're a deep red color otherwise they're unripe. They should be kept cool, have no cuts in them and be prepared with sugar or some other sweetener to draw out their flavor."

Pete's extensive knowledge is based on more than 60 years of hard-won experience in the industry. The son of a produce peddler, he began working door-to-door for his father at age 4 selling produce—as well as anything else that could help bolster the family income, including Christmas trees and Easter flowers. In 1959, his father bought a lot on Washington Avenue in Bergenfield and ultimately opened Napolitano's Produce. Pete bought the business from his father 10 years later and ran it for more than 25 years.

Though officially retired from the grueling 20-hour workdays of his retail operation, the 66-year-old Oakland resident still relishes the opportunity to help people navigate their local produce aisle or farmer's market. "The key to maximum freshness and flavor is to let things ripen on the vine, bush, or in the ground until maturity," he recommends.

And, Pete warns, don't be fooled by price. "We often think that 'you get what you pay for' with food and that you're necessarily getting a better quality product when you pay more for it, but it's really just about supply and demand," he says. "I tell people to buy produce when it's plentiful and cheap in the supermarket because that reflects that it's in season and the weather is just right for it. I also recommend that people buy fresh and local...it helps our area farmers and yields a much better-tasting and more nutritious product."

So what's the key to Jersey's excellent produce: soil, climate or location? According to Pete, it's more about process. "I think our success in growing great produce has to do with our one-crop seasons in Jersey and the care that our farmers take to get the best yield out of that crop. Then, because it's grown locally, the produce gets to us quicker, so it's fresher and tastier." ■

Susan Bloom is a freelance reporter. She lives in Chester.