Eating with the Seasons: A Month-by-Month Guide to Napa Valley Produce

Napa Valley is known for its vineyards, but the region's farms produce an equally impressive variety of fruits and vegetables throughout the year. For anyone who shops at local farmers markets, knowing what is in season helps you plan meals that taste better and cost less. Peak freshness means the produce was picked at the right moment, so it has more flavor and nutrients than items that traveled long distances. This guide walks through what you can expect at market stalls each month, from the first spring shoots to the heart of winter.

Seasonal eating also supports local agriculture and reduces the environmental cost of shipping food across the country. When you buy what is abundant, you get the best of what the valley grows. The Farmers Markets of Napa Valley are a great place to find this bounty, offering a direct connection between the grower and your kitchen.

Spring: March through May

March

March is a transition month in Napa Valley. The last of the winter root vegetables share space with the first tender greens. Look for carrots, turnips, and parsnips that have sweetened through the cool months. Artichokes begin to appear, and their season runs through early summer. Leafy greens like spinach, kale, and chard are at their best, since the cool weather keeps them from turning bitter. Fava beans also arrive, and their creamy beans are a treat when shelled fresh. If you see green garlic or spring onions, grab them, they are milder than the mature bulbs and work well in salads and light sautés.

April

April brings the first stone fruit of the year. Apricots start appearing, though they are still a bit early for peak sweetness. Strawberries from local fields begin to show up, and they are a world apart from the supermarket versions. The berry season stretches into summer, but early strawberries have a concentrated flavor. Asparagus is another April highlight. Look for thick spears that snap cleanly when bent, they are more tender than thin ones. Peas, both English and snow peas, are in season, and their sugars turn to starch quickly after picking, so eat them within a day or two. The market also fills with fresh herbs such as basil, mint, and cilantro.



May

May is when the summer produce starts rolling in. Heirloom tomatoes begin to appear, though the real abundance comes later. Still, early varieties like Early Girl and Stupice offer a taste of what is to come. Zucchini and summer squash show up, and they are best when small, around six inches long. Cherries arrive, and the valley grows several types: Bing, Rainier, and Queen Anne. They are delicate and bruise easily, so handle them gently. The last of the spring greens, like arugula and mizuna, are still good, but they will bolt as the weather warms. If you see rhubarb, its tart stalks make excellent compotes and pies.

Summer: June through August

June

Summer is the peak season for stone fruit in Napa Valley. Peaches, nectarines, and plums are everywhere. The key to good stone fruit is a fragrant smell and a slight give when pressed near the stem. Apricots are still around, but they taper off by mid-summer. Berries of all kinds are abundant: blackberries, raspberries, and blueberries. They do not ripen after picking, so taste one before you buy. Heirloom tomatoes hit their stride in June. Varieties like Brandywine, Cherokee Purple, and Green Zebra offer flavors that range from sweet to tangy. Eggplants and

peppers begin to appear, and the first sweet corn of the season arrives. Corn loses its sugar quickly, so buy it the same day you plan to eat it.

July

July is the height of summer abundance. Melons come into season, and the valley grows cantaloupes and watermelons that are exceptionally sweet. Look for melons that feel heavy for their size and have a uniform shape. Tomatoes are at their peak, and you will find dozens of varieties at the market. This is also the time for cucumbers, okra, and tomatillos. The heat brings out the best in hot peppers, so if you like spice, July is your month. Figs appear, and they are a short-lived treat, look for them at the market early in the morning before they sell out. Herbs like oregano, thyme, and rosemary are lush and fragrant.

August

August continues the summer bounty, but some crops begin to slow. Peaches and nectarines are still good, but the selection narrows. Grapes start appearing at markets, though most are wine grapes, there are table grapes too. Late-summer vegetables like winter squash, pumpkins, and Brussels sprouts start to show up, but they are still small. The last of the summer berries are available, but they are less plentiful. This is a good month to stock up on tomatoes for canning or sauce making. The Farmers Markets of Napa Valley often have special events in August, celebrating the harvest with tastings and cooking demonstrations.

Fall: September through November

September

September is a transition month. The last of the summer produce overlaps with the first fall crops. Tomatoes are still around, but the plants are winding down. Peppers and eggplants are still productive. The first apples and pears appear, and the valley grows several varieties. Pears are best when they yield slightly at the neck, but apples should be firm. Pomegranates come into season, and they are a good source of antioxidants. Fall greens like kale, chard, and collards start to sweeten after the first cool nights. Broccoli and cauliflower also arrive, and they are at their best when the heads are tight and compact.



October

October is the peak of the fall harvest. Winter squash and pumpkins are abundant, and they store well if kept in a cool, dry place. Root vegetables such as beets, carrots, and parsnips are sweet and tender. Brussels sprouts are at their best after a frost, which concentrates their sugars. Persimmons appear, and they are astringent until fully ripe, so wait until they are soft. The last of the figs may still be around. Mushrooms, especially chanterelles and porcini, are foraged in the coastal hills and sometimes appear at market. This is also the time for quince, a fragrant fruit that is too hard to eat raw but makes excellent jams and jellies.

November

November brings the end of the farmers market season for many stands. The focus shifts to storage crops. Potatoes, sweet potatoes, onions, and garlic are in good supply. Cabbage and kale are still going strong. The last of the apples and pears are available, and they store well into winter. If you see sunchokes, also called Jerusalem artichokes, they are a nutty-flavored root vegetable that can be roasted or sliced raw into salads. The market starts to wind down, but there is still plenty to buy for Thanksgiving cooking.

Winter: December through February

December

Winter in Napa Valley is mild compared to much of the country, but the growing season slows. The market still has root vegetables, winter squash, and hardy greens. Look for leeks, which are at their sweetest after frost. Celeriac, also called celery root, is available and adds a subtle celery flavor to soups and stews. Citrus is just coming into season: oranges, grapefruits, and lemons from local groves. They are not as famous as the valley's wine, but they are excellent. The last of the persimmons and pears may still be around. Storage tips: keep root vegetables in a cool, dark place with good airflow, and wrap greens in a damp cloth to extend their life.

January

January is the quietest month for fresh produce. Farmers markets are smaller, but they still offer good options. Root vegetables are the mainstay: carrots, beets, turnips, and parsnips. Hardy greens like kale, collards, and Swiss chard survive the cold. Citrus is at its peak, so stock up on oranges and grapefruits. Some farmers grow winter greens in greenhouses or under row covers, so you may find arugula and spinach. The key to winter eating is to embrace what is available rather than longing for summer tomatoes. Roasted root vegetables and citrus salads are a good way to cook with the season.



February

February is the last stretch of winter. The market still has root vegetables and citrus, but the first signs of spring appear. In late February, you might see the first asparagus, though it is usually from warmer areas. Strawberries from southern California sometimes appear, but they are not local. The best bet is to focus on what is still in season: leeks, potatoes, cabbage, and kale. This is a good time to try new recipes with winter vegetables, and to start planning your spring garden. The market is quieter, so you can chat with farmers about what they will plant in the coming months.

Knowing what produce is in season each month helps you make the most of Napa Valley's agricultural gifts. Whether you are a home cook or a professional chef, shopping at local farmers markets gives you access to the freshest ingredients. The cycle of the seasons means there is always something new to try, from the first spring peas to the last winter squash. By aligning your meals with the harvest, you support local farms and enjoy food at its peak.