

# The Local Table: Sweet ripe cherries are waiting for you at the Market

By ANNE HARVEY

"Pale golden translucence with a rosy pink blush; their flesh is crisp and very sweet."

These plump, sweet fruits go fast once they arrive at the market. So, you may want to buy now. I've read a description that Rainier cherries "sparkle gold and blush like the rays of a Northwestern sunset." It's true! Pop these cherries into your mouth and bite down for the burst of intense honey-sweet flavor.

Rainier cherries ripen after Bing and other red cherries, so perk up your appetite with the ruby-red classics first. Have fun with a big bowl of cherries in your lunch, or add them to surprising salsas, or feature them in summery desserts (*I've included a mouth-watering recipe for Cherries Jubilee Parfait by Kathy Casey, Page 13*).

Then, serve Rainiers freshly rinsed and icy cold. Au natural, they are a simple, sublime pleasure. When the Rainiers are gone, all is not lost... next look for the later 'reds.' Anytime, ask your green grocer for a recommendation of the day.

Local cherries are available from June through August. The peak is around Independence Day. Our sweet cherries are not stored, they are picked, packed, delivered and consumed as soon as possible. Choose firm, plump, shiny cherries with even, deep-red coloring and green stems.

Rainier cherries are white gold with a cheery rose blush and usually have some skin discoloration. Slight scuffing or brown spotting are often an indication of their high sugar content and low acid. Avoid cherries that are soft, have brown spots or are leaking and sticky. Immature cherries will be smaller, harder, less juicy and may be paler. Over-mature cherries will be soft and dull and may even be slightly wrinkly.

Cherries bruise easily. Cherries also do not continue ripening after harvest and they start breaking down rapidly. Handle your cherries with

care. Refrigerate immediately after purchase and plan to eat as soon as possible for best taste.

If you absolutely must postpone eating them, cherries can be kept fresh in the refrigerator for up to several days. Absolutely avoid placing cherries in the sun or warm areas like a car or kitchen counter. They will go limp and start rotting, quickly.

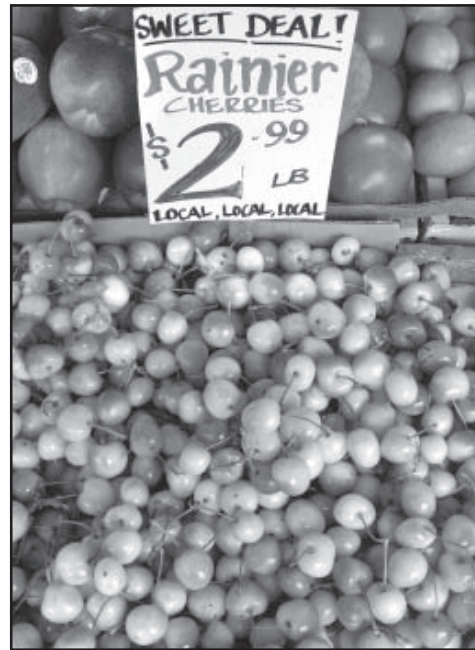
Red cherries are reputed to have significant amounts of melatonin and anthocyanin antioxidants with anti-inflammatory properties. Maybe you'll really sleep better and feel more comfortable after tucking into a small bowl of cherries! Research has shown that cherry consumption can help the body prevent heart disease and cancer, and promote bone health. These benefits may be due to the antioxidants.

Cherries are low in calories and high in potassium, vitamin C, B complex and minerals. According to researchers, a flavonoid (called quercetin) found in cherries has anticarcinogenic properties that can help prevent heart disease. Cherries containing large quantities of quercetin per serving, surpassing most other fruits.

Anthocyanins found in cherries also block inflammatory enzymes, reducing pain. In fact, 20 cherries are 10 times as potent as aspirin and may have positive effects on gout and arthritis pain. Sweet cherries are also considered to be excellent sources of boron. Boron consumption, coupled with calcium and magnesium has been linked to increased bone health.

## History, Facts and Fun

Cherry pits have been found in several stone-age caves in Europe. The Romans carried cherries throughout Europe and England along their routes of conquest. Tart or sour cherries are an ancient, wild-stone fruit recorded by Monks in the 17th century and first cultivated in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). European settlers brought



cherries with them to New World. Early French colonists from Normandy brought pits that they planted along the Saint Lawrence River and the Great Lakes. Cherry trees were part of the gardens of French settlers as they established such cities as Detroit and other Midwestern settlements.

Peter Dougherty, a Presbyterian missionary, is credited with planting the first commercial cherry orchard near Traverse City, Michigan, in 1852. Henderson Luelling traveled the Oregon Trail from Iowa to Oregon in 1847 with an oxcart planted with 700 fruit tree seedlings. While only 350 seedlings survived the journey, Luelling began the tree fruit industry in the West.

Most of the sweet cherries (this includes Bing cherries) produced in the United States now come from Washington State, while the tart varieties come from Michigan. Although there are about 1,000 sweet cherry varieties, the Rainier, Lambert, & Bing together make up about 95 percent of the sweet cherries growing in Washington and Oregon. The Pacific Northwest produces about 70 percent of the cherries sold in North American markets.

'Queen Anne' is often used to make maraschino cherries because they bleach easily. Before the Bing and Rainier varieties were developed the Queen Anne cherry ruled. It is a much older variety and was earlier known as 'Napoleon,' or 'Napoleon Bigareau.' It had its name changed to 'Royal Anne,' eventually morphed to 'Queen Anne,' by nurseryman

Henderson Lewelling when he established his pioneering orchard in Salem, Oregon, in 1847. It is from Lewelling's renamed 'Royal Anne' that even the Bing & Lambert are derived, as well as scores of other varieties.

The Rainier is a cross between a Bing and a Van, two sweet-red varieties. Harold Fogle, who at the time directed the cherry breeding program at the Washington State University Research Station in Prosser, made the cross in 1952. The variety was released in 1960. It was specifically designed to cross-pollinate with Bing cherries. However, the 'Rainier' soon achieved its own fame as a gourmet cherry. Washington state requires Rainiers to reach a minimum of 17 brix (a gauge of sweetness) before they can be picked. They often reach a brix of 20 (a peach that registers at 13 brix is considered perfectly sweet).

All these popular cultivars were developed from *Prunus avium*, the sweetest of the wild cherries, native to the British Isles and Eurasia. The pure wild form is rarely gardened.

In early June through August, cherries reach the height of perfection and harvest time kicks into high gear. The challenge to the farmers is to get the fruit from the tree to market as soon as possible. It is also important that the cherries remain as cool as possible during this process to insure they stay fresh. Cherries are hand picked in the early morning hours and carefully covered to protect them from the sun. Once the cherries arrive at the packing plant they are cooled to about 35 degrees Fahrenheit, which helps retain flavor and quality.

Growing cherries is full of high drama and considerable risk. Mother Nature can change conditions daily, even hourly, to help or hurt the fruit. Late freezes can damage flower buds, temperatures of 90 during fruit development will cost the cherry a day of life. If it rains more than a day, the cherry bursts its skin. If the wind blows too hard, the cherries bruise from rubbing together. Birds eat a quarter to a third of the crop. They know the peak ripeness even better than the farmers and can neatly leave clusters of pits hanging on stems.

A Central Washington grower once said, "Lying under a tree, watching the clouds, and listening to the birds eat my cherries is a beautiful thing." How about coming down to the Market, picking up a bag for yourself, and another to share with friends, while enjoying our glorious Northwest summer weather. That will be a beautiful thing, too.



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