

# Putting Best Fruit Forward

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“What are you eating? Make me hungry.”

My grandpa would prompt me with this simple question anytime there was food on my plate. He'd ask me to describe it for him. He loved hearing about food. He loved hearing if you had an appetite.

When I was seven, grandpa George was proud of me for finally learning how to pick the ripest nectarine of the bunch. And near ten, he grew to trust me on Christmas morning to be able to cook the entire pound of bacon to crisp perfection—“low and slow” is how he directed me over the years. He showed me how to turn over each and every potato in the oil until the edges were just golden, before he added the eggs and cheese to scramble for his signature morning feast. He never presented the dish to the family—partly because I would steal the plate from his hands so fast and scurry out to display it in front of the dozens of happy, hungry mouths. It wasn't Christmas morning unless we had George's potatoes and eggs.

George wasn't a gourmet chef with a diverse repertoire. Other than breakfast, I only saw him fry a hot dog in butter, or for a snack he'd toast me a piece of Thomas's English muffin, spread it with butter, and top it with slices of sharp cheddar cheese. But he grew to teach me everything I know about food: how to receive it, how to truly taste it, how to share it, and how to feed a family. His greatest gift to me was the ability to pick ripe fruit. This is not a superfluous life skill. George had been rehearsing this sensory ability his whole life.

George Greco grew up one of eleven children, packed in a tiny single-family house in

Tacoma, Washington. His parents had moved there from Calabria, Italy, somewhere around 1910. After making their way through Ellis Island, they “knew someone who knew someone” who claimed that all of the Italians are in Tacoma. And so, the small port city just outside of Seattle is where the Grecos started their American life. Just thirty years prior, construction on a cable car line in Tacoma began—one of only three in America—and at the time the city was poised for growth and commerce. Between 1900 and 1910, Tacoma's population jumped from thirty-seven thousand to eighty-three thousand people, despite the onset of the Depression.

The family came to operate a small grocery store in the K Street corridor, now called M.L. King Way, which emerged as the main strip of community business and social activity in the heart of the historic Hilltop district. Records show that in the 1910's, K Street was lined with brick buildings which included storefronts mostly comprised of grocery stores with baked goods, fresh meat and fish, confections and the like—including the Greco's market.

At the age of nine, George and one of his younger brothers, Tony, who was six, were tasked with knocking door to door to sell whatever fresh produce and fruit they could to the neighborhood. The Greco market, aptly named the K Street Market, was run by the head of the house, Battista Greco, and two of his eldest children, Carmela and Ralph. From what stories I have gathered, they struggled to sell their provisions—and, in what I came to learn later as true Greco habit, would mostly give away more goods than they should have



to their regular customers who were struggling during the worst of economic hardships. George and Tony needed to help bring in additional income, and Battista needed them to sell fresh produce to the residents of the greater K Street corridor in order to help feed their nine brothers and sisters back home.

One of Battista's produce truck drivers, Mr. Constantino, would wait to pick up little George and Tony outside of their school and would drive them around Portland Avenue. House to house they went each afternoon, with crates of fresh fruit in tow. George was the salesman, and Tony collected the money.

Knocking at the door was a pair of charming, blue-eyed, deep-skinned boys with million dollar smiles, offering up handfuls of fruit: oranges were five cents each. A carton of strawberries cost fifteen cents. Raspberries and cantaloupe were considered an elegant treat, and they sold it for as much as forty-nine cents. Fruit season in the spring and summer couldn't last long enough, so George quickly learned to become a tactful salesman to distribute what wasn't selling at the

store. He would point out to his customers the ripest fruit of the bunch that needed to be bought and consumed immediately.

"Well, these are the juiciest ones I've got this week!" he would explain with breast full of oranges teetering in his tan little arms. "Feel how heavy they are – and the smallest ones are the sweetest, see?" This was his way of trying to sell the pieces of fruit that were not as full-size as the ones they sold back and his parents' grocery store. The front shelves of K Street Market had what Tony calls "eye-catchers"--full and ripe peaches, berries and sweet melons on special. One by one the best picks of summer negotiated their way in to the homes of hungry Tacoma.

"Most people screamed at us," recalls Tony, now in his mid-nineties. "But we were able to sell everything."

And as for the fruit that people didn't have the money to buy, George ended up just giving to them for free anyhow. "Oh, gee, sir—you see, these strawberries will be the best today and tomorrow," cried George, as he plucked off its green top and



offered the overripe, warm berry with his fingers. "It's no trouble, just enjoy them." I imagine what he couldn't give away was brought back home, the good parts consumed, but any turned fruit and scraps were left to rot in the streets in the hot evening sun. As anyone from Washington says about Tacoma, they'll tease, "Oh, the aroma of Tacoma..." They're referring to the stench of this urban port city, but I can't help to think it was the collective smell George's exceedingly ripened fruit that didn't quite make it that day.

But the family didn't last to live in Tacoma much longer. In 1933, the youngest Greco sibling, Helen, was discovered in Tacoma on the local KOL-Seattle radio station singing on their program "The Happy Go Lucky Hour." She was approached by Bing Crosby's brother, Larry, who suggested she make her way down to Hollywood to have a hand at a singing career--and that she did. She subsequently signed a contract with Columbia Pictures and was poised for success. One by one, the rest of the family followed Helen into Hollywood. George made his way down to Los Angeles on a produce truck from Portland in December of 1935.

Not long after, George was drafted into the war and was stationed in France as a medic. At this time, everyone knew who his sister, the singer Helen Grayco (they changed her name to so it didn't sound so ethnic). He used this connection to his advantage--the boys in the army would offer to make his bed in the morning, and George never lifted a finger. Except for lending a hand in prep in the army kitchen, peeling potatoes.

Every Thanksgiving feast we prepared as a family, the only hand George offered was to peel the fifteen pounds of potatoes for us to boil and mash. I always was in awe of his incredible speed.

"They made me do this in the army," he'd groan, as if this was World War II's greatest inconvenience.

When George came back from the war, he fell in love with Barbara, my grandmother. Her father, Dante J. Dente, was an attorney from Detroit, but also happened to own a few grocery stores in Los Angeles. George married Barbara not only because she was a tremendous cook, but the father-in-law was a kindred spirit and businessman. George was offered the job to take over and run his grocery

market. His brother Tony got his hand in there, too, as he married Barbara's sister. The two brothers who married two sisters ran what came to be the most impactful corner grocery market in Hollywood in the 1940s.

Dente's Carmel Market took up the corner of Santa Monica Boulevard at Havenhurst. (Today it is occupied by Marco's Italian restaurant and a generic liquor store, which sits kitty-corner to Michael Cimarusti's Connie & Ted's restaurant). Not much changed for George and Tony when they ran the store: George handled the sales of produce and Tony handled the books. George sold his way through the homes of Hollywood—and often was delivering groceries door to door of the stars in the hills. We have old grocery store receipts from the Golden Age's greatest starlets, the valued and most frequent customers. Loretta Young came in from time to time after dropping her children off at school, and she'd pick up a couple of fresh peaches and pears. Other regulars included Bobby Darin, Mel Tormé, and Peter Lorre who was a Saturday morning shopper.

George always said his favorite customer was Fred Segal, but long before he came to own the high-end retail brand he does today.

"I am trying to start up my denim business," he'd plead to George, "so can we work something out? Here, take these jeans for your girls to wear. Would you take a shirt?" My grandpa bartered nectarines or melons for pairs of original Fred Segal denim.

"Oh, Fred, bring the shirt over later—just take these for now," George would dismiss with a sack full of hand-picked produce. Tony would get so upset with him because they were losing money weekly.

"We would joke that we ought to build a statue of George on Crescent Heights for all of the people he was helping," teases Tony. It's all he knew to do. George didn't know how to run the register, so often times he would just look at the food the shopper came to the counter with and would guesstimate its cost.

George was known for demonstrating the quality of the produce in front of his customers. Forget samples—George would talk them through it. "Look at these cantaloupes," he'd say. "They've been here all week and they're finally ready to

eat." Usually fruit that sits on a stand more than three days would turn off the modern Angelino, but George refused to sell under ripened fruit. "I nursed it, I rehearsed it," was his motto. "Look at this—you can feel the juice. The smaller ones are the sweetest. It's ready today. You have to buy and eat this today or it won't be too good tomorrow." People ate it up from his hands. What a salesman.

Dente's Carmel Market was sold in 1973. Tony and his sister, Helen, came to partner in opening an iconic restaurant in Brentwood on San Vicente called Gatsby's (it is the sister of the restaurant first started in New York) from the 1970's which fed Hollywood's elite for about a decade. George was a silent partner in the investment. Tony had the knack for running the front of house, but George wanted to remain in the comfort of his market with his fruit. He eventually retired at fifty to the deserts of Palm Springs where he nurtured a grapefruit tree and Meyer lemon tree grown at his condo complex. You can certainly bet they're the best in all of the Coachella Valley.

On his final days, when he realized for the first time he was old, George only wanted one thing to eat, and he was told he couldn't have it. His palate was suddenly restricted to apple sauce and bananas.

"I'm hungry," he sighed to Barbara and to us. "What are you kids eating tonight? Make me hungry. Make me potatoes and eggs, Barb."

We didn't fight him, we let him have it. We made him his potatoes and eggs, with crisp bacon cooked low and slow like he taught us. He taught everyone, from Tacoma to Hollywood, to build, share and appreciate our moments with our food, simply and wonderfully.