

Dean Okimoto's Dos and Don'ts of Produce

Why Buy Local?

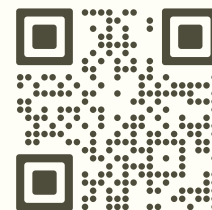
- The price of produce grown in Hawaii might be higher, but there are other factors to consider than what you pay at the register.
- Buying local produce sustains Hawaii's economy by keeping money in the islands and supporting local agriculture jobs. Buying local also means you're buying fresher product. Fresher product lasts longer and tastes better. Due to our high levels of sunlight and rich volcanic soil, fruits that are grown locally will taste way better than fruits that are imported or shipped in. Compare a mango from Hawaii with one grown in Mexico or even a locally grown orange compared to one from Florida.
- Hawaii's consistent sunlight contributes to the intense flavors of fruits and veggies, when compared to those grown in mainland regions. Local arugula and mustard cabbage are great examples of greens that you will find to have stronger, more pungent flavors than those grown in Central California.

Altitude vs. Sea Level

- I went on a trip with master sommelier Chuck Furuya. We saw the same grape varietal grown at sea level and at 7,000 feet of elevation and tried wines made from them. The difference was night and day. Grapes grown at sea level are exposed to warmer temperatures, resulting in wine that is bolder in flavor, whereas the wine made from grapes grown at elevation is more subtle, buttery and elegant.

Skin on Produce

- Vitamins and nutrients are concentrated in the skin of most vegetables and fruits. For example, you should not peel kabocha squash. Just clean the skin well and cook. The skin will become tender, and it is edible. The same applies to potato, eggplant, zucchini, cucumber, apple, peach and kiwi.





Selecting Produce

- For cantaloupes and honeydew melons, smelling the ends of the fruit gives you an idea if it is ripe and how sweet it might be.
- For watermelon, tap or thump the melon with your index finger. The fruit should have a hollow sound and may even vibrate through the fruit. If it sounds solid, it's not ready.
- For citrus, look for fruits with thinner skin as this tells you it is riper and you will get more juice out of the fruit.
- For berries and cherries, they are best in the summer months. They grow different varieties throughout the year, but summer is the best season for berries because of the increased daytime temperatures and the varieties are bred for their sweetness. Winter berries are bred to withstand the colder months and not so much for taste.
- You can tell the age of asparagus by looking at the bottoms of the stems. If the bottoms are white, that means they've been growing on the shelf for a while and should be avoided. Green bottoms mean they were recently harvested.
- When considering strawberries specifically, you should avoid them within a week of inclement weather in strawberry growing regions of Southern and Central California like Monterey, Oxnard, Camarillo and Salinas. Fruits, including tropical fruits like mango, papaya and lychee are sweeter when they are harvested during periods of sunny weather.

Storing Vegetables and Fruits

- When storing green vegetables, never put them in the same area of the refrigerator as onions or fruits that produce ethylene gas. This naturally occurring gas will turn leafy green veggies yellow. The same goes for storing greens in a bag; if you notice yellowing leaves, remove them immediately. Yellow leaves release more ethylene gas, causing the rest of the greens to yellow at a faster rate.
- Most ripened fruits can be placed in the bin of the refrigerator to limit their ethylene gas from affecting other vegetables. Refrigerating fruits slows down their natural ripening process, so leave most fruits at room temperature to ripen and refrigerate if you're not ready to eat them yet.
- We have learned to eat everything on the colder side, but fruits have much more flavor and developed sugars if they are stored and eaten at ambient temperatures. Try refrigerating an orange and leave one on the kitchen table, then peel and eat them at the same time to compare the taste.
- Refrigerating bananas will turn them black quickly. Generally, if bananas have a hint of yellow color, they will naturally ripen in a couple of days. If they are green, they will take 3 to 5 days to be ripe. To ripen bananas quicker, place them in a paper or plastic bag on the kitchen counter.

