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Ojai's Oldest Farmer...

By Emily Thacher

.. is Ben Mercer. He was born in Ventura in 1907 and has lived most of his years right here in the Ojai Valley. Ben has never had a boss; he has been a farmer his entire life, farming the land that his grandparents settled. When he was born Ojai was not incorporated, it had no paved streets, there were no deep wells for irrigating crops and radios didn't come to the Valley until he was in high school.

Needless to say, Ben has lived through substantial changes to the Ojai Valley. He continues to get out daily to work in the orchards he planted and is chock full of stories and knowledge about the goings-on in this valley.

My curiosity about the Mercer family goes back to my grandparents, who were close friends with the Mercers. My grandfather, Elmer Friend, and Ben were notorious for stopping in the middle of Grand Avenue to lean out their truck windows and chat at length about farming. Up through the 1980s, residents of the East End knew just to drive around them rather than wait.

My mom remembers that when she was growing up Ben was Ojai's youngest farmer, as he was half a generation younger than most other Ojai farmers at the time. I



recently had the pleasure of meeting with Ben and two of his daughters. Lots of stories were told and I quizzed Ben for information about how the Valley has evolved over the years. Occasionally I would ask Ben something and he would say "Oh, that was before my time, that goes back to the early days." Yet to all of us, his early memories are ancient Ojai history!

Ben's grandparents came to Ventura County from the Midwest in 1882 and settled property in both Ventura and Ojai. "When it got too foggy in Ventura he'd come to Ojai. Too hot in Ojai, back to Ventura. He was back and forth all the time." In this way, Ben's father grew up with the best of both worlds and, subsequently, so did Ben and his siblings.

One of Ben's earliest memories was walking downtown before the arcade was built. "I can remember one day sitting on the porch of grandfather's house on the corner of Oak and Cañada. And Mr. Libbey, remember Mr. Libbey? He came by, we were sitting out on the porch and he stopped to talk, and he wanted to talk my grandfather into moving his business to Ojai so he could vote in Ojai. He wanted Ojai incorporated. And they talked and talked and I remember he left and my grandfather, he says "Now remember you that's Mr. Libbey." That was Edward Libbey, who was eventually responsible for incorporating Ojai into a city and building up the downtown area. Ben has known the movers and shakers in this town from the get-go.

As a bachelor Ben settled in Ojai to farm his family's land. At the time, the Mercer ranch was dry-farmed apricots, one of the biggest crops in the county. From Gridley Road west to Mercer Avenue was all apricots, including several parcels of the Mercers'. Two apricot trees that Ben planted are still alive in his hay field on Grand Avenue next to Mercer Avenue, "Over 70 years old, never had a drop of water." Ben has fond memories of Ojai's apricot days, although he made it clear that it was a heck of a job to get them all picked and dried before they fell to the ground.

When wells were drilled, making irrigation possible, the Mercers converted their plantings to oranges, Navels to begin with. "The early plantings in Ojai were mostly Navels. The nurseries those days weren't particularly good, they got a lot of Australian Navels. They're poor quality in Ojai. Well, they had these mixed up with the Washington Navel. And



then they budded them [the Australian Navels] over to Valencias. So we had Navel orchard here with some Valencia, all mixed up.”

Eight acres of Navels in the back of the Mercer property are over 90 years old, interspersed with the old Valencias, some of the original trees planted by Ben’s family. The remainder of the Mercer property was eventually planted to oranges, which became Ben’s mainstay.

I asked Ben how he got his supplies, labor, and crops transported. Ventura and Santa Barbara were the cities with goods and services. “Surprising, really, how fast you could make it— couple of hours from Ventura. With a buggy horse you can travel pretty fast. I remember when Tom Clark had a livery stable on the corner of Ojai Avenue and Signal Street. My earliest memory, before the Arcade was built, I was just a kid and I went downtown. I remember my grandfather sent me down to the drug store for some medication and I walked down there and it was like the old Western-front buildings, the wooden fence, it was a boardwalk. And actually right there on Signal Street, I don’t know if it’s still there, but there used to be a big drive-through into there, and that’s where the buggies would go.” (Yes, it’s still there on Signal Street—right next to the jewelry store.) “The entrance was on Ojai Avenue. After Tom Clark went out of the livery stable business, his brother in-law had cars and he’d run a fast bus to Ventura. That car went in on Ojai Avenue and came out on Signal Street, drove right on through. See, people didn’t have a car. If you had business in Ventura, you’d go down and rent a buggy horse, and you’d drive it to Ventura, and you’d put it in a stable down there. They’d feed and water the horse and when you’d done your business you’d drive home again.”

As Ojai lacked much commerce, I asked Ben how it was being a bachelor in town—who he met, what there was to do. When I asked Ben who was in Ojai, it sounded as though it was similar to these days. “Characters. Of all kinds. There was always an accumulation of them in Ojai. Fellows from all over the world, you might say, you’d run across them. Floaters and others come to Ojai often times for the winter. Lots of odd people.” The center of social interactions for most men in the community was the Boyd Club, where people could meet and talk. “Sitting out on the Boyd Club porch in the wicker chairs facing Main Street,



there was stories always going on, stories of all kinds. You'd sit there and listen to stories of the early days. You know the fellows they couldn't tell a lie, 'cause there's other fellows say 'I was there.' And you couldn't exaggerate too much."

As a single farmer Ben ate out frequently. "To begin with, there was only one restaurant in town, the Ojai Café. That was the only place to eat in town. And I can remember, ice cream was not common. On a Sunday their specialty was ice cream and cake. They would order a freezer of ice cream from Ventura and it would come up on the bus on Sunday morning and you'd have ice cream and cake for dessert on Sunday. Once a week you had ice cream." In those days bachelors such as Ben were often invited over for meals. My grandparents, Joni and Elmer Friend, had him over for dinner one evening in 1950. There he met his future wife, a blind date of sorts with Madge Quinn, who was visiting the States from County Mayo, Ireland.

I pried Ben for his thoughts on being a young farmer these days, asked if he would do it all again if he were 30 years old today. "Well, that was an easy question to answer years ago. Today, who's got the answer? Nobody's got the answer. Trouble is, land values are so high today you can't buy a piece of property in Ojai anymore. In my day you'd start out little by little and work up. Today you can't get started. It won't work out, with the land prices you couldn't come out at all. Trouble is, today there's no level playing field. But agriculture, you can't predict the future."

Now that Ben is 96 he isn't able to work the way he once did. Yet he continues to get out every day, helps with the irrigation of his orchard, occasionally drives the tractor. He is the last of his generation, and it must be terribly lonely as none of us young'uns can truly relate to his life. His youngest daughter, Pat Norris, told me with a chuckle, "Well, he's still planting Valencias, he must be the only one in the county doing that." I suspect that Ben continues to plant them out of habit and with the knowledge that Ojai grows the best Valencia oranges in the world.

Ben's three daughters hope to keep the ranch in the family for the sake of their children, ages 4 though 21. They understand the ups and downs of farm economics, own the land and all have outside jobs so they can make it through



some lean years. Yet Ben and his daughters do have trouble keeping on top of ranch work. The rising cost of water, weed control, and coyotes chewing irrigation lines are just a few of their battles. Hopefully they'll be able to keep the farm going so that Ben's newest Valencia trees prove just as fruitful for the next generation of Mercers.

The Perfect Fig?

By Camille Sears

I grew up surrounded by wonderful produce – a Sicilian birthright of basil, tomatoes, blood oranges, grapes, melons, and finocchio, to name only a few. The harvests defined the seasons, and mornings were spent eagerly searching our gardens for the most promising items of each variety. All crops were cherished; however, there was one particular fruit that created special anticipation when ripe—an unpredictable prize that sometimes has just the right combination of sweetness, texture, and flavor to make it unforgettable. I'm talking about the elusive perfect fig.

Inevitably, most of the figs we ate were rather ordinary, and accepted as such, like common table wine. But with figs, there is always the potential to exceed one's expectations, and to do so to an unimaginable degree. There is no rating system to identify the ideal fig. You just know it when it happens, mainly because you can't imagine any fruit tasting better than what is now in your mouth.

To secure the best fruit, many of our family and friends nurtured their version of the most treasured fig tree. These were heirlooms, and during visits I listened with youthful wonder to each owner's story of how this one unmatched variety came into their possession. Sometimes, if I said the right things and showed the proper interest, I was given cuttings to take home and grow for myself. In this manner (and from some covert snippings), I developed a small collection of fig trees.

When my daughter was very young we would forage these then-shoulder-high trees, searching for the best figs. I'd find a promising fruit, split it open for her, and ask, "How is it?" She often answered, "Good, but not great," implying it wasn't perfect. This, more than anything else, inspired me

to keep seeking out better selections.

Years later, our fig collection continues to develop, and with kind help from the National Clonal Germplasm Repository at UC Davis, we now grow about 75 distinct varieties. Of course, not all of them are well suited to our farm in Meiners Oaks, but there have been a few consistent standouts. Almost every variety we grow has some good figs each year, but we want to experience the selections that bear baskets of sweet, succulent fruit – or even better, can produce the perfect fig.

Finding the best candidates requires some effort – there are several edible fig classes, with hundreds of varieties to choose from. The most familiar figs in our area are classed as “Persistent.” These common figs, which include the Mission, Brown Turkey, Genoa, and many others, do not need pollination to set fruit. Another group of figs is known as “Smyrna,” with the most familiar variety in California being the Calimyrna. Smyrna figs require pollination from an inedible caprifig (so named because only goats will eat them). We grow a few caprifigs to help our Smyrna varieties set fruit, with pollination provided by the female fig wasp. And then there is the “San Pedro” class of figs, which includes the King variety. San Pedros are an intermediate group, with their first fruit set in spring (called the breba crop) being self-fertile, and the main crop in summer requiring pollination.

To get the sweetest figs, you must ripen them fully on the tree. There is an old proverb on how to select a ripe fig: If it has a hangman’s neck (droops at the stem), a mourner’s eye (honeydew oozing from the eye at the bottom of the fruit), and a penitent’s robe (skin tears and cracks), it’s ready. Regrettably, many figs don’t follow this rule. I try to wait until the fruit is soft, somewhat droopy at the neck, and does not exude milky latex when picked.

Choosing my favorite figs is never easy. Some varieties do well one year, then poorly the next. Others will taste great, but have open eyes that make them fodder for dried fruit beetles. And sometimes, out of nowhere, a mediocre variety will produce a few spectacular figs. I think this is what makes growing the different figs so enjoyable – foraging, but never knowing when that perfect fig will appear, and then finding the one that almost drops me to my knees.



Here are my choices for the varieties that produce the best quality figs for us, and are most likely to produce truly exceptional fruit:

Adriatic: With green skin and red flesh, Adriatic is often called a strawberry fig. One October evening I was walking the orchard when I came upon some of the best figs I've ever eaten – from our Adriatic and "Ojai Straw" trees (I think both varieties are probably Adriatic). It was nearly a religious experience. Col de Dame, another green fig with incredibly deep red flesh, is also magnificent.

Bournabat: A large, luscious fig with pink, fleshy pulp. Bournabat has the most interesting texture in your mouth – like a stringy marshmallow, only better.

Flanders: A violet-skinned fruit with pink-amber flesh. Flanders has reliable yields of very sweet figs almost all summer. For consistently good figs, it's hard to improve on this one.

King: A San Pedro fig that has a wonderful, sweet breba crop. These figs follow the ripeness proverb to a T, and a branch of drooping, weeping Kings is a beautiful site in early summer.

Marabout: A light red fig, with a good summer crop that droops, cracks, and weeps on cue when ripe. Marabout is a choice Smyrna fig. To ensure pollination, I placed several caprifigs judiciously close to our Marabout trees.

Panachee: A beautiful fig with green and white stripes, reminiscent of a hot air balloon. Inside, the flesh is deep red. Our Panachee figs are ready in September, and have no spring breba crop. When they first start to ripen, the flesh is somewhat dry and has a pronounced citrus quality (think Tarocco blood orange). As it softens on the tree, the flesh turns to jam, and develops a wonderful strawberry orange flavor. Panachee figs have thick skin, a tight eye, and hang well on the tree. For flavor, appearance, and resistance to the elements, Panachee is my overall favorite.

Tena: I love this fig for its refreshing, lightly sweet flavor. The flesh of a Tena is moist, but not heavy, and is light pink



or amber. When really ripe (late summer), you can almost drink it. I have several Tena figs scattered about our farm just so I can snack on them without returning to the main fig orchard.

UCR 278-128: A large, sweet, yellow fig that deserves a better name than it has now. UCR 278-128 is my son's favorite, and he will go straight to this tree before searching the others. The late summer crop is much better, and is more resistant to the dried fruit beetle, than the early breba harvest. This fig is similar to another yellow variety, Deanna.

Violette: Also known as Violette de Bordeaux, this fig is small, deep violet in color, and has an intense strawberry jam flavor. Even the tree is petite, which makes it a great choice for a pot in a sunny patio.

143-36: I include this yet-unnamed variety, as it is the most promising fig I've planted recently. The 143-36 has a nice sugar-acid balance, and the red flesh under a green skin tastes to me like a ripe Laroda plum. This fig has a closed eye, it droops to let you know when it is ripe, and sets a good late summer main crop. Our 143-36 trees are only two years old, and already one of my favorites.

I'm willing to bet that most of us have never tasted a truly amazing fig – perhaps this is why some people don't even like them! For the best fruit, you will either need to raise your own, or get them fresh off the tree from the grower. It's the only way of hoping to find the perfect fig.

Young Foodie Entrepreneurs

By Joline Godfrey

Summer - gardens are lush and a young man (and woman's) heart seems inevitably to turn to... starting a business??

It's true. Summer is the time of year when kids, either bored and looking for "something to do" or, anxious for a little more spending money, are likely to ask: Can I start a lemonade stand? Or to offer some other enterprising idea that demonstrates their entrepreneurial impulse is coming to life.



My first experience with a Young Foodie Entrepreneur was with Cody Gehrke, the son of a neighbor in Ojai. As a 10-year-old, Cody attended softball games and noticed that there was nothing for the fans in the stands to drink. He talked his "Investor Angel" mother into taking him to Costco to buy soda wholesale. When the next game rolled around he loaded his little red wagon (honest) with ice and cans of soda and went off to sell drinks to the fans. He sold out, cleaned up and was hooked. And that little red wagon became his signature - his branding instrument if you will.

I followed Cody's adventure during the years he was my neighbor, in part because he was such an imaginative and enthusiastic kid, and in part because teaching kids about money and business is my work. I know lots of Codys today — young people who, when taken seriously and given support, do some amazing things, using their entrepreneurial spirit to gain self reliance and confidence.

So if a young member of your family asks: Can I start a lemonade stand? Take them seriously, and take them through a conversation that might go something like this:

Foodie Mentor: Of course you can. We need to answer some questions together and then we'll start the business.

Foodie Kid: What questions?

Foodie Mentor: Well for example, who will you sell to?

Foodie Kid: I don't know (or, alternatively, anyone).

Foodie Mentor: Who might want something cold and delicious on a hot day?

Foodie Kids: Someone thirsty, I guess.

Foodie Mentor: Exactly. And where might you find a lot of those people?

Foodie Kids: Walking on the street, on one of the trails behind the house (this kid might live near Shelf Road!), or at Janie's soccer game!



Foodie Mentor: Good! You've just figured out the first part of your business plan: Who needs what you have to sell. Now let's work out how much it will cost to create something thirsty people will buy and how much you can charge them. Then we'll think about how to advertise your service.

Taking kids through a rudimentary business plan for even their most fleeting summer ideas has multiple functions:

First, it tells them you're taking them seriously — an important message to give kids who come up with ideas and test the waters for whether the world will laugh at them or make them part of the community.

Second, it introduces new vocabulary. The critical years for a successful financial apprenticeship are 5-18. Kids who master the language of money and business during this time will be safer and more competent when they strike off for college, first job, or any other path that leads to independence.

And finally, the conversation will help them be successful in a first enterprise. Sending kids off to start a lemonade stand or any other project with an air of loving amusement but no direction does nothing to help them develop new skills. Kids who express interest in a first business are giving you a ripe teaching moment—use it to give them a learning experience.

76% of all adults think that giving kids financial guidance is a moral imperative; only 36% have any idea how to do that. So for the Foodie Mentor who is drafted, but unsure where to begin, here are other questions to help your Young Foodie Entrepreneur explore:

- What will it cost to make the (lemonade, dried apricots, trail mix, brownies, etc.)? Take them through a detailed listing of everything they will need and ask them to add up the costs.
- How will you advertise your service? Many kids will automatically say they want to advertise on TV (they have little conception of the millions of dollars spent on advertising to them every year). You will need to steer them to creative tactics that are cheap and clever (wearing a

sign, getting friends to deliver notices to neighbors, sending e-mails, posting news on local Internet bulleting boards, etc.)

- How can you find out if anyone will buy what you want to sell? This is a chance to help them build confidence by doing a survey of potential customers—calling, asking, e-mailing. Kids can get away with tactics that the adult entrepreneur isn't "cute enough" to pull off!

- Can you make money with this business? Too often adults encourage kids to do a business for fun and let the kids off the hook for figuring out a balance sheet. The problem with this is that early lessons stick. And kids who think they can start something without thinking it through, spend money without accounting for what happened to it, and who depend on mom and dad to do their homework for them, will be haunted by ineffective financial habits for a long time.

You may find that your questions are too hard or that your would-be entrepreneur loses interest in their fleeting idea. Kids' attention spans are, of course, short. But the conversation itself will lodge in that developing mind, and the next time they come up with an idea to do a lemonade stand they will be prepared with some answers. And you just may find yourself living with a Foodie Entrepreneur!

Godfrey is offering a free Brownie Business Plan Workshop for 12 Foodie Kids interested in making money with a food business. Kids 12-17 eligible. Call 965-0475 to register or e-mail JolineG@aol.com for more information.

For kids who actually do want to start a lemonade stand, here is an option that will give a competitive edge:

Ginger Lemonade

1/2 C. chopped fresh ginger
1 C. sugar (may use less or substitute honey)
8 C. water
2 C. fresh Meyer Lemon Juice
1 Sliced lemon

Serve with lemon slices. Serves 10.
130 calories/serving; 0 fat grams.



Mix sugar, water and ginger root in sauce pan, heat to boiling, stir occasionally. Remove from heat. Add lemon juice and cool for 15 minutes. Remove ginger and refrigerate lemonade for at least 1 hour until chilled.

And once the business gets going suggest they try blueberry lemonade; strawberry lemonade and other combinations their customers might find intriguing!

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