

William Hillyard

Orange Turns Green

I toured the ranch from space. The little white-roofed farmhouse. Cute. Trucks and greenhouses and farm implements. Outbuildings. A small building fronting Van Buren. The farmstand, perhaps. Jimmy'd said something about a farmstand. I checked out the orchards, too, twenty-one acres on Madison, three more on Heather, still more on Jefferson Street near Gage Canal. From my satellite vantage, I could see the individual trees as tight rows, a dot matrix of fuzzy emerald balls--orange trees, avocados--creating a pixilated pattern of deep green on sepia brown. The whole place looked baked, the images clearly taken during the dry, dusty, drought of Southern California summer.

I cruised back over Orange County. This seaside county is orange in name only. The green grid of groves is gone, paved over with rows of pink stucco and red tile roofs. In 1945, there were more than three hundred thousand acres of citrus in the county--the densest concentration in the country--now there are virtually none. Planted in their place are ticky-tacky tract homes, green lawns, black asphalt, and blue kidney pools.

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Here on Earth, in Orange, between Lemon and Olive, just off Almond, I wander around bright canopies, leafy lettuce stacks, and geometric pyramids of oranges, wafting with the smell of freshly popped kettlecorn. Jimmy, only a bust above the piles, calls to a customer. "Here comes trouble," he jokes, drawing the man to the table.

"Wind must've been blowing," the guy comments, pawing at the mound of wrinkled fruit, a green gradient sorted by ripeness.

"Wind drops," Jimmy replies. Hundreds of his avocados had been blown off the trees during the high winds the week before and those on display are downright ugly. Jimmy leans his sturdy beer-keg body against the table. His thin, tanned

legs and bright, new-white shoes dangle like bell clappers from under his green apron. On this blustery February day, as on every day, Jimmy's in shorts. He knifes into one of the black, warty skins, "If these were supermarket avocados," he says, "they'd be black inside." Salting a buttery slice, he hands it to the customer. "These have never been in cold storage, so ours can be very ugly on the outside and still be very nice on the inside." Cold storage allows the giant fruit distributors to store their fruit for long periods of time, in the case of avocados, two to three months. Oranges even longer. "You'll want to eat these tonight," Jimmy says.

Jimmy's shriveled avocados, like so much of his produce, will not take any blue ribbons at the county fair—at least not for looks. Yet, even at a pricey buck-fifty each, nearly every customer that approaches his table at this Orange, California, farmer's market leaves with some.

Over the table, green changes hands in small denominations, paper for produce, cash only. "Rule of thumb, I need to do about \$500 per market to pay bills," Jimmy tells me. "If you don't do that, you are just spinning your wheels." At five for a dollar, that's a lot of limes. With Jimmy and his crew working nine markets a week, fifty weeks a year, Jimmy has to sell \$225,000 worth of produce just to break even. But, he says, at a good market, on a good day, he might make upwards of two thousand dollars for his employer, Tilden Farms. Jimmy is Tilden's General Manager.

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The average piece of produce travels 1500 miles grower to grocer. And it tastes like it. Anymore, supermarket produce, with its waxy, processed look, and flat, cardboard taste, seems more like manufactured merchandise than fresh food. The peaches are barged in from Chile, avocados from Mexico, the oranges from Argentina. In this globalized world, even produce carries a passport.

I had stumbled upon this farmer's market a few months ago and, here, tomatoes tasted like I remembered tomatoes tasting, back when tomatoes had a taste. Peaches were sweet again,

apples crisp, and the oranges juicy and ripe. At the farmer's markets, the people selling the produce know its appellation, its pedigree. They talk the talk.

This is where I met Jimmy. His market stall had apostles three deep pushing close to hear his latest pronouncements about the state of the avocado and his prophecies about the future of fruit. He builds personal, one-on-one relationships with his customers. And they trust him. I have joined his flock, a disciple of the incomparable Jimmy Moreno.

I asked Jimmy if I could tag along, hang around his market stand. I was excited by my discovery, "I want to know more about this whole farmer's market phenomenon."

"Well, I'm the guy to talk to! It's too bad you can't come out for a ranch tour," Jimmy said.

"Yeah, I'd really like to see..." excited to see a real working farm, to roll up my sleeves, pick the fruit myself, to feel again part of the earth, part of the food chain.

"Can't do it," Jimmy cut me off. "We used to give ranch tours. But some kid stepped in a hole and broke his leg, his parents sued. We don't do it anymore. It'd be OK with me; you know it's not me. Brad would say-- I know him, I know him like the back of my hand--he would say 'Absolutely not.'" Brad owns Tilden Farms; he's Jimmy's boss. "I just don't see it happening. Come to the Orange market on Thursday. It's an afternoon market and a lot slower this time of year; my wife can handle the booth by herself, we can talk as much as you want."

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All around the black asphalt blooms, as E-Z Ups, red, blue, sprout up, converting the parking lot into a farmer's market. Weathered hands unfold tables, lug fruit. The whiff of the kettlecorn begins to wrangle customers from the nearby streets. Jimmy's oranges are bagged: five pound, ten pound, and twenty pound sacks. There's a heap of loose ones. A mound of grapefruits. Shoving five small avocados into a green mesh bag, Jimmy asks his wife, "Three-fifty?" She glances over, her eyes calculating; then with a nod so imperceptible as to be telepathic, she returns to stacking citrus in a black plastic trough.

His avocados, sorted by ripeness, spread across the table. Haas. Fuerte avocados fill a small sliver on the table; they pass unnoticed by all but the most savvy customers. The Fuertes are the good ones.

“The avocado connoisseur that you are, I’m surprised you don’t like the Fuerte better than the Haas,” Jimmy says. He hands me a slice of the emerald-green fruit. “They’re more nutty, they have a higher oil. It’s just a completely different taste from the Haas, a richer, more avocado taste.” I slurp in the green-gold sliver. Not chewing, I swirl the velvety gob around with my tongue. “Isn’t that nice? They’re really smooth.” Jimmy eats the remainder of the avocado himself, squeezing the flesh from the skin, licking his fingers. “The reason why these aren’t as popular is that they have a thinner skin, they bruise easily.” They just won’t stand up to commercial processing. He searches through the stack to find an even better example, one even creamier. “This one here is absolutely perfect, absolutely perfect.” Always teaching, instructing his customers and building their loyalty, “Once you get knowledge, knowledge is everything.” From over his shoulder a baby waahs. “Can I, excuse me, I’m sorry,” a woman, cell phone planted on her ear, interrupts the session. She rocks a stroller. In it, her baby sucks his knuckles.

“I’m with ya, babe.” Refocused now, Jimmy resets, mid-sentence, and retunes to this new customer. She has his full attention.

“Can I just get a bag of lemons, I’m sorry.”

“No, no, no, no, no.” He hops to her request, springing towards the lemons. Not all customers can afford to linger.

“I’m fast,” she says, then into her phone, “I’m in the farmer’s market.” She’s two places at once. She’s not here for a lesson. She grabs her purchase and together, Jimmy and his wife chorus a drawn out, “Thaaank youu!” Bright yellow lemons become cool green cash.

Weird, but Jimmy’s limes are yellow, too. Limes, I learn, ripen to yellow like lemons, but are sold green commercially to distinguish one from the other. Commercial distributors paraffin wax them to retard their ripening. On the table in front of the bin, Jimmy displays a cut lime--limes remain green on the inside even when ripe. “Customers can see what’s inside, they

can smell it.” They’ll buy a yellow lime, he knows. “You got to educate people,” Jimmy tells me.

These limes are here precisely because they’re yellow; the large commercial packing houses won’t take them. “Besides, they wouldn’t take these because of the size—they’re too small. They want uniformity.”

The oranges, lemons, and avocados that Jimmy brings to the farmer’s markets represent but a fraction of Tilden’s total production. To illustrate his point, he squints through the tiny pinch between his finger and thumb and whispers, “The farmer’s markets.” That’s the portion of production that comes here to be sold. Then, with arms out-stretched, five feet, eight inches apart, he says, “Packing house”—the percentage they send to Corona College Heights Orange and Lemon Association, their citrus co-op. “Tractor trailers full,” he says. Thousands of tons. “There just aren’t farmer’s markets enough to sell all that produce.”

The packing house, Jimmy knows, will only take fruit that has what he calls a “premium eye-aesthetic.” Fruit that isn’t beautiful is rejected. “People eat with their eyes,” he says. The packing house won’t take a yellow lime. In fact, they want their oranges green. Jimmy only sends them under-ripe fruit that will stand up to the rigors of commercial processing. “They don’t want produce with high sugar, because you get no shelf life,” Jimmy explains. Ripe fruit spoils fast. Green oranges can be stored for months and ultimately manipulated to produce the desired look. Ethylene gas is used to destroy the natural green pigment in the peel; they are further degreened using controlled temperature and humidity to create the colorful supermarket produce we see in the stores. Finally, it’s waxed to keep it looking that way.

“I color pick for the farmer’s markets,” he says, explaining how he sorts the yellow limes and orange oranges from the fruit primed for the packing house. To this, he adds the stuff deemed too big or too small or too irregular or blemished to make the grade. “I tell them, ‘Give me the blood, guts and feathers,’ I don’t care.” The key, according to Jimmy, is getting the most out of your yield. “If you do it right, you’re never throwing anything away.” The packing house destroys the imperfect produce—at a loss to the grower. For Jimmy, the markets have become an outlet for this fruit; a place to unload the product that, before,

was considered waste.

To Jimmy, these farmer's markets are just a vehicle to move product, another profit center, another income stream. Jimmy tells me the farmer's markets put an additional eighty to a hundred thousand dollars, clear, in Brad's pocket. "All in green." Cold, hard, cash. This is—stripped of all figurative connotations—wind-fall profit.

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I hover over my own house. One tiny tooth in what looks like an endless tangle of gray zippers. Tract homes stitched along asphalt streets form a schematic of geometric, unnatural angles. A Monopoly millionaire's game board. Below me, my orange trees are blooming. So are the lemons and limes. The tangerines can not be far behind. My six thousand-odd square feet produces peaches and pears and vegetables, too. I'm proud of my yard-- a big one for Orange County. I take care of my trees; I use no poisons, only organic fertilizers, no chemicals. It's healthy and wholesome. None of this can be seen from space.

Corona College Heights Orange and Lemon Association, though, is clearly visible. Bounded by dead presidents—Lincoln to the north, Jefferson to the east— it sprawls over twenty grey-paved acres owned by Brad's father who collects more than ninety-thousand dollars a month for its rent. The humungous citrus cooperative is run by Brad, Jimmy's boss. "Four acres under roof," they boast. Literally dozens of semi-trailers, like the teeth of a comb, spike from the perimeter of the building. Packing crates honeycomb the property. On a rail spur creeps an iron worm of tankers. Even from up here, I sense its cacophony, deafened by the dissonant drone of electric motors and the rattle of mechanized production packing 3000 cartons of oranges per hour, 1500 of lemons, chugging, chugging, per hour, every hour.

I should drive out there. I know I won't.

I remember one spring, years ago, driving through the acres of citrus that once carpeted so much of Southern California. The fluid green of the groves looked as if it had been poured into the valleys, seeping down the golden, boulder-strewn mountain slopes. This time of year, when the trees are in bloom, the air is

dense with heady perfume of the blossoms. Orange blossoms. I recall the realization that it was that sea of citrus trees exuding that magical fragrance, the intoxicating scent reaching in through the open windows of the car and taking me. That bouquet, that overwhelming aroma of orange blossoms, is my time machine, teleporting me back to that time, those long melancholy drives down lonely roads, walled in by leafy ramparts. It sends me reeling. There were rickety old fruit stands overflowing with oranges and avocados, ten for a dollar. You could trust the fruit was good; you could see it, you could taste it.

Jimmy says that the fruit he brings to the farmer's market is the same stuff he sends to the packing house, the same stuff that ends up on the supermarket shelf, the same processed-looking and cardboard-tasting, manufactured commodity sold in the stores. It isn't. These oranges are better than the ones I get in the supermarket, I can taste it.

And taste is why we buy it, isn't it? An orange as ripe as Jimmy's, trucked the thousands of miles from Texas or Florida, or warehoused for months would arrive at the supermarket a pulpy mush. Jimmy's farmer's market produce has been rejected for its ripeness—precisely the reason it tastes good. It's not been ethylene gassed or artificially degreened. It's not been heat-treated or cold-stored. He drives it himself the 30-odd miles from the ranch to the market only a day or two off the tree. His fruit is better, I guess, because it's fresher. It's local.

Is that good enough, though? I have to admit, I was caught up in some romantic ideal. I had wanted Jimmy to be an Old McDonald farmer, a man of the earth, you know, like what I always thought a farmer was, what I'd remembered from my childhood. I wanted that cute little farmhouse to be his house, not some vestige of a by-gone era, recently sold-off, by the way, to be plowed under. To make way for a strip mall, no less. So what if Jimmy's not a dirt-under-the-fingernails guy in overalls and a straw hat? That would have been a great story. But it just ain't Jimmy's.