

life } EXHALE

# THE *fruit* CONNECTION

*Picking berries with Grossvater*

BY LUCIE L. SNODGRASS



I love few things more than the experience of the pick-your-own farm. You can dress in your oldest, rattiest clothes; linger outdoors for hours in a beautiful setting; and best of all, you can eat whatever you like, and no one minds a bit.

There's something basic and satisfying about gathering your own food. Although pick-your-own farms used to be primarily places to buy lots of fresh produce at a reasonable price, today they're often the only connection many people have with raising and harvesting food. All of my city friends love bringing their kids so they can experience picking a ripe raspberry that hasn't traveled from Chile in a plastic container.

My grandfather Lehmann took me to my first pick-your-own farm. One summer morning when I was seven and staying with him and my grandmother in Switzerland, *Grossvater* and I set out with a packed lunch, a tall walking stick and two round baskets with straps that we wore on our backs like rucksacks. From my grandparents' apartment building, which looked down to Lake Lucerne, we took a right instead of our usual left and headed up the hill, away from their village of Hergiswil and toward the mountains. We were going to pick cherries, *Grossvater* announced.

Walking side by side with my grandfather, his large hand encompassing mine, I spilled out questions: "How do you pick cherries? Should I leave the stems on or pull them off? Will there be bees? How would I reach the cherries at the top of the tree? And, most important, can I eat some while I'm picking?"

"You'll see when we get there," he told me with a patient smile. "It's easy and fun."

About an hour later, we reached an ancient farmhouse, its wood exterior darkened by age, its wide balcony and windows festooned with boxes of bright red geraniums. Attached to the house was a huge barn that smelled of cows and freshly cut hay. We could hear the cows' bells ringing from the milking parlor.

Next to the house in a south-facing meadow filled with wildflowers was a sheltered orchard of about two dozen cherry trees, each with a ladder propped against it. Other families were there already, laughing and talking, the men stripped down to their undershirts, the women in wide-brimmed hats and the children in well-worn clothing like mine because, *Grossvater* said, we were certain to stain them.

We exchanged greetings with the other pickers and then chose a tree of our own. "Move your basket around to the

side," my grandfather instructed me, adjusting his own so that the basket rested against his hip.

"And look for the darkest cherries you can find," he said, "firm and plump, like this." He puffed out his cheeks and tapped them lightly to demonstrate. Then he showed me how to pick the fruit by tugging gently on the stem, so I didn't bruise the cherry. He examined the one he had in his hand, then popped it into his mouth and closed his eyes. "Mmmmm," he said, smiling broadly. "Delicious."

I was so short that I could barely reach even the lowest branches, so *Grossvater* held the ladder while I climbed its bottom rungs. I ascended into clouds of purple-black *Schattenmorellen* cherries, which emitted an intoxicating perfume, like melting chocolate. I picked and ate my first one as *Grossvater* had done, then another and another, licking my lips and savoring the sweet, slightly chewy fruit.

We picked in companionable silence, each lost in our own thoughts, until the sun was hot overhead, my arms had grown tired, and my hands and clothes were, indeed, stained with cherry juice. We stopped then, rinsed our hands and faces in the hollowed-out log trough where the animals drank, and took a rest in the tree's shadow before paying for the cherries and heading home. That night my grandmother made a delicious cherry clafouti for dessert, and *Grossvater* and I each proudly ate two big servings.

My sister Alexandra and I carry on the family tradition of picking fruit together. Whether in Vermont, where she lives, or here in Maryland, we regularly pull on old shorts and shoes and head to the closest pick-your-own farm. We laugh like lunatics, swap recipes with other families among the rows, eat at least a pint of fruit apiece and pick until our containers are full. Everyone else has a wonderful time, too, even first-time pickers. Once, I took a little girl with me, Laurel, a talkative third-grader whom I mentored through a local school program. She had never been to a pick-your-own farm before and was excited and full of questions. "How do you pick blueberries? Can I pick as much as I want? Can I eat them right there?"

"You'll see when we get there," I told her. "It's easy and fun."

It was. And it still is.

*In lieu of polish, contributing editor Lucie L. Snodgrass sports vivid juice stains on her fingernails all summer long. ■*