

Sweetness by the slice

California's plentiful melon crop is finally ready to enjoy

Thump, thump, thump: It's the sweet sound of summer.

Melon season – finally! – has rolled into local markets, bringing a refreshing low-calorie treat to hot-weather meals.

After a slow start due to cool weather, melons are ripening en masse and should be in good supply through October.

"Everything is about two weeks later than usual," said Luis Miranda, owner of Wholeness Farm in Lodi. "Melons love heat; 90 degrees or more. Now that it's finally heating up, they're catching up."

Along with many different vegetables, Miranda grows five varieties of organic melons and sells them at Sacramento's Wednesday farmers market at Cesar Chavez Plaza. He describes their flavors like fine wines.

"Galia – it's very fruity, tropical with a hint of honeydew," Miranda said as he offered a chunk of this Israeli muskmelon. "Charentais – very French with a hint of butterscotch. True cantaloupe; smells sweet, but it's very light on the palate. Muskmelon – it has a butterscotch after-taste, but not as complex."

He saves his best for last: The odd Pil de Sapo.

"It's very crisp, very sweet; the sweetest of all melons," Miranda said. "It measures 60 degrees on the Brix scale (the same scale used for the sugar content in wine grapes); most melons top out at 50."

More than a dozen different varieties of melon now can be found at local farmers markets. But America's overwhelming favorites remain the big three: watermelons, cantaloupes and honeydews.

That trio represents 99.2 percent of all melons sold in the United States, according to Produce Retailer, an industry publication. Actually, it's more like the big two; watermelon makes up 51.5 percent of supermarket sales, cantaloupe, 40.9 percent.

Over the past decade, our consumption has remained steady. We each eat about 25 pounds of melon a year, usually between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

Our taste for watermelon has shifted away from the cumbersome 20-pounders to compact seedless varieties such as **PureHeart** (marketed under the Dulcinea brand). They're smaller (under 5 pounds) and fit easily in the refrigerator.

Most of the watermelons we eat here come from California, which will account for 205 million pounds of watermelon this season, says the National Watermelon Promotion Board.

We're lucky; our melons may be late, but they'll be plentiful. Extreme heat and drought withered the watermelon crop in Mississippi, Georgia and Texas, reports the USDA. That's made melon prices creep a few pennies higher nationwide.

Tired of watermelon? We're in Cantaloupe Central, with more than 90 percent of the nation's summer crop grown in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys.

Said Miranda, "It's our rich soil and the heat; that's what makes a great sweet melon."

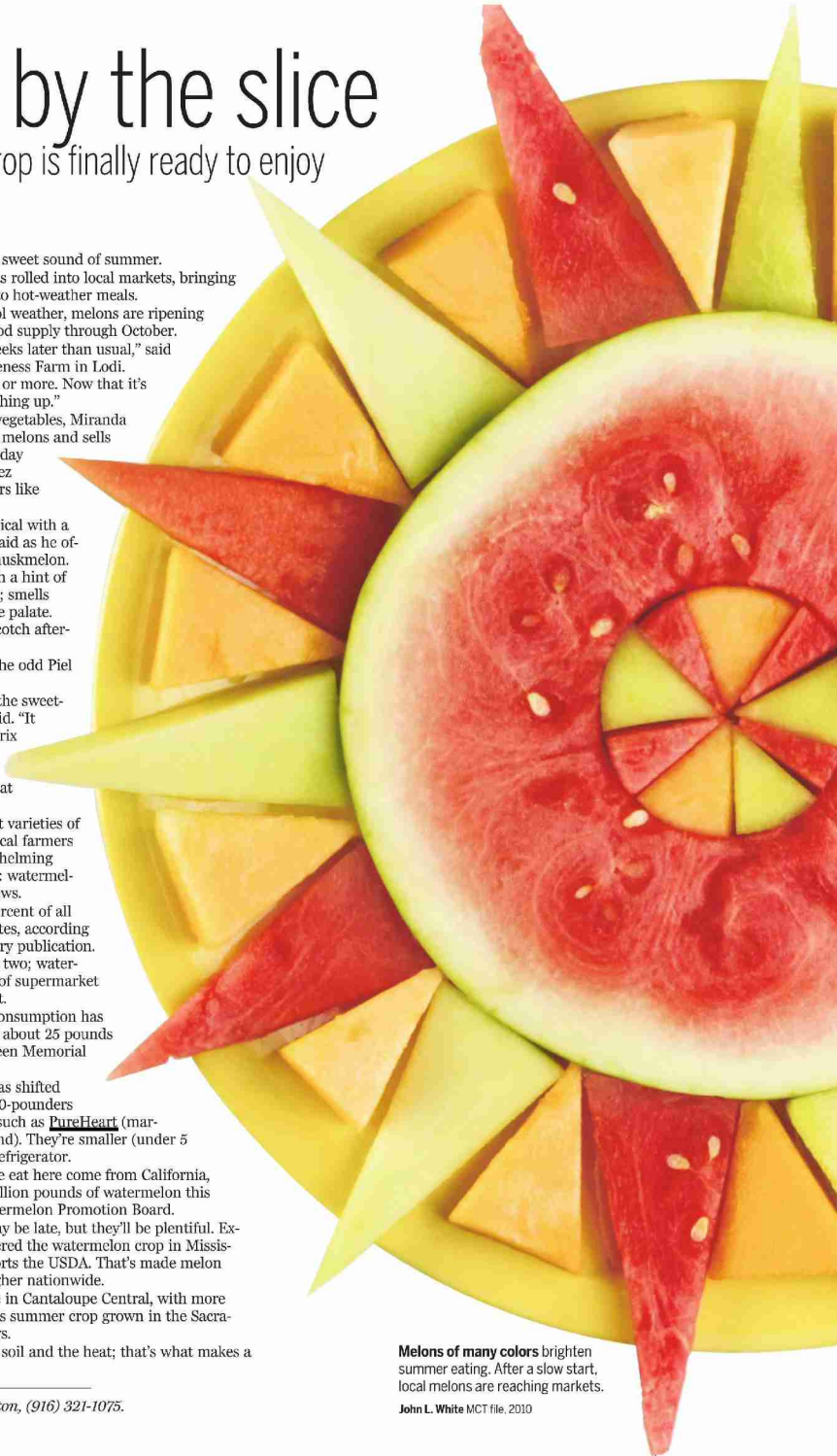
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INSIDE

Want to try some other melons? Check out the list on **Page D2**

For tips on selecting melons and how to store them, plus recipes that use melons, see **Page D2**



Melons of many colors brighten summer eating. After a slow start, local melons are reaching markets.

John L. White MCT file, 2010

