

Getting better acquainted with produce

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My Word

I FEEL I've developed a much more personal rapport with my produce since the emergence of companies whose specialty is stamping gummed IDs on multimillions of individual edibles from the fields and yields of growers foreign and domestic.

Thus, a mere glance at a fruit-bowl may now reveal the origin of our apples, the provenance of our peaches, and the tracking code of our tomatoes. Thus, assembling a fruit salad almost seems an exercise in number-crunching — California peaches and cantaloupe, #4004 and #4050, respectively; Washington apples, #4129 — along with the usual peeling, coring and de-seeding.

It's not that we've heretofore been totally unable to get to know our favorite fruits and vegetables in the way that Bay Area foodies have been solemnly exhorting us to do. Chiquita banana has been a boisterous part of the consumer culture for decades through the endlessly issued musical alert, "Never put bananas in the refrig-er-ator." And, oranges and other citrus have long been brand-stamped in ink.

Yet in the early stages of my infatuation with today's new and newsier produce labels, I sliced-up a tomato I knew as # 4664 while dwelling mentally — as foodies would have us do — on why it had come on its long journey from Canada to a supermarket in this state known for tomato-growing. Thus, I was able to score a few points for produce political correctness while suffering reduced guilt for scarfing down a fine tasting, if foreign, salad tomato.

Big Chuy, an acorn squash so labeled but more formally identified as

#4750, became a delicious dinner side-dish. The big guy's label, being larger, conveyed welcome bits of bio, including hometown (Nogales, Ariz.). There was even space for baking instructions. Though not lengthy, my relationship with Chuy was, I concluded, richer for my review of the cheerful stuck-on resume.

I even toyed with the possibility of some culinary matchmaking: a menu to include the macho-sounding Big Chuy and the ringingly romantic sounding Dulcinea (aka, PureHeart watermelon). I soon stifled the impulse. A squash/watermelon pairing, I sensed, might boggle even the most blissed-out-with-menu-boldness foodies.

Scoffers, of course, may sneer that the concept of produce labeling is nothing more than clever, colorful, point-of-peeling sales promotion. However, I've concluded that the core technology might become more widely utilized — say as a social and business tool to help people get past the hurdle of awkwardness in getting acquainted.

That mode of thinking stems from a labeling company's description of its capability in "gently" affixing positive, useful, eye-catching information to "most cold, damp, sensitive, rough, hairy or waxed surfaces." Might that include human skin? If so, could it provide a 21st century elective to the exchange of dull business cards and the tedious scanning of name-tags in noisy, badly lit settings where folks meet for business or socializing?

Perhaps there'll be future gatherings in which attractively designed mini-bios have been tastefully gummed onto each person present.

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