Word of Mouth: Savoring the last bit of summer

BY FRAN MCCULLOUGH
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS OF ORANGE

We know, of course, that summer goes on in our little bit of the world long after school starts and a few people stop wearing shorts. The crops don't always cooperate, though there are ways to cope with that. It's been a great year for peaches and I'm embarrassed to report that I didn't discover we have a truly wonderful source of peaches at a stand I drive right past on Old Route 86 south of Hillsborough at least once a week and never even noticed it until the raves began on the Chapel Hill Foodies site very recently. The Sweet Susans were fair competition for the glorious Abbott's peaches from South Carolina an especially generous friend brings me whenever he detours from trips to and from the mountains in the far west of the state.

I no sooner discovered this great local source than it vaporized, caught between crops, but now promising to have peaches right through till October 1st. The Sweet Susans came from a partner source in Eagle Springs, and if you see them anywhere, you should pounce. The next crop will probably be Late Augusts, which I've never tasted. Grier White and his brother Trey have the stand under a popup tent just back from the road and if you follow Grier on Facebook you'll be up on the plans. The only other way to access these best peaches is to go to the state farmers market in Raleigh. The New Hope Market on "New" Route 86 stocks up there at least once a week and they are likely to have great peaches in their market area too. Unripe peaches are no problem at all—just do as the New York Times Cooking folks say: put them in a brown paper bag with an apple or a banana for up to three days to get the best flavor. Take a sniff to know when they're ripe. Frozen peaches are excellent and almost no one can distinguish them from fresh ones in any cooked dessert. Directions for freezing are easy and all over the internet.

Grier says that in addition to more peaches there will be apples, eggs, a special coffee from El Salvador—and pecans once fall really gets going. I also spied some little containers of beef tallow for sale at the table. Their own acres of peach orchards are off the little road behind the stand and just a few years old so not yet producing at full capacity, so there's much more to look forward to.

I'm still besotted with tomatoes, though they are for sure on their way out. But there will still be plenty of delicious ones through September at Walker's Farm in Hillsborough and at their stand at the Eno Farmers Market in Hillsborough on Saturdays—smaller but intensely flavored. Perfect for making Marcella Hazan's iconic tomato sauce she initially made with a stunning amount of butter, though she later relented to the health police by dropping it down to a mere 5 tablespoons for 2 cups of tomatoes. The butter calms down the acid in the tomatoes, and brings out other flavors, so you don't need to add sugar. Marcella's Northern Italian style sauce includes a whole onion cut in half around the waist and simmered with the tomatoes for 45 minutes, then removed. Ella Quittner, author of "Obsessed With the Best," cuts Marcella's onion into quarters and browns them gently in the butter before adding the tomatoes for an even more intense flavor. Some homemade marinara sauce lurking in the freezer is a huge midwinter treat to discover.

And why not try adding half a cup of intensely fragrant fresh tomato leaves to your batch of tomato sauce as well as some basil? Tess Koman of seriouseats.com tried it and loved it. At Whole Foods you will shortly be able to find dry farmed tomatoes, intensely flavored fresh tomatoes great for BLTs and pairing with mozzarella.

When all the fresh ones are really gone—and do we ever know we're eating our last great peach or tomato of the season? —go looking for the gorgeous cans of Bianco di Napoli's very delicious crushed tomatoes grown in Northern California and available at Target or Walmart or Fresh Market or Whole Foods. They're not at Costco,



GOOGLE IMAGES

which like Target is a source for high-end low-carb pasta from the old country—all three brands begin with a B so it's confusing.

Lidia Bastianich insists on San Marzano tomatoes, preferably with a DOP certification right on the can. Ruth Rogers, the proprietor of the River Café, insists on Italian tomatoes at a minimum, jarred better, drained in a colander first for a great tomato sauce Southern Italian style—and she adds only a few garlic slices and some salt.

PICKLE LEMONADE

Something else I missed is last summer's rage for pickle lemonade, which even the staid New York Times recommends—a sort of fresh upscale version of Gatorade, perfect for hot Labor Day celebrations. You don't have to make a whole batch of it to see what it's like, of course; you can just choose a good bottled lemonade, like the low-sugar one at Trader Joe's, and mix it 4 parts lemonade and one part pickle juice (8 ounces lemonade plus 2 ounces pickle juice), chilled together, to see what you think. A little tequila in there might help. Don't use pickles with flavorings like garlic or sweet ones—just regular jarred dill pickles found in the refrigerated section of the market.

Source: New York Times Cooking *Cook: Kasia Pilat*

Makes about 5 cups, serves 8 to 10

7 large organic lemons at room temperature

2/3 cup sugar

3 cups chilled, filtered water

1 to 1 ¼ cups dill pickle juice plus pickle spears for garnish

Ice, for serving

Thinly slice 1 lemon, discarding the seeds, and set aside for garnish

Roll the remaining lemons firmly against the countertop before juicing them to extract as much juice as possible. Use a citrus juicer or quarter the lemons, then squeeze enough to get 1 cup of juice. Add the peels and any unjuiced lemons to a large jar, such as an 8-cup Mason jar, a wide-mouth pitcher, or even a large bowl.

Add the sugar to the peels and lemon pieces in the jar. Using a wooden spoon or a muddler, muddle together until the sugar has mostly dissolved, in 1 or 2 minutes.

Add the lemon juice to the jar, cover and shake vigorously—if there's no lid, just stir it. Be sure the sugar has fully dissolved. Add the water and the pickle juice to taste. Shake or stir again to mix, then strain, using a fine-mesh strainer. The lemonade can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.

To serve, pour into glasses over plenty of ice. Garnish with a lemon slice and a pickle spear.

Oh, the last of the corn on the cob … another bittersweet moment. But unless the fresh corn is really at its peak, you're likely to get a better result with the grilled corn recipe that follows if you use defrosted frozen corn kernels, which will have been picked at their peak. It has the feeling of the grill, as well as the char, while you can reserve grill space for the big protein. The street corn in Mexico is not sweet, so avoid the frozen kernels that say seriously sweet or supersweet and white corn—you want the yellow corn.

MEXICAN STREET CORN SALAD (ESQUITES)

SOURCE: seriouseats.com *COOK: J. KENJI LOPEZ-ALT*

Serves 4

This terrific side dish is pan to mouth food, so have all the bits prepped before you start and dry the defrosted corn kernels well if you've chosen that route. Leftovers should not be an issue, but they won't store well.

2 tablespoons vegetable oil (or try avocado oil)

4 ears fresh corn, shucked, kernels removed, about 3 cups, or defrosted frozen kernels

Kosher salt

2 ounces feta or cotija cheese, ½ cup finely crumbled

½ cup finely sliced scallions, green parts only

½ cup (1/2 ounce) fresh cilantro leaves, finely chopped

1 jalapeno pepper, seeded and stemmed, finely chopped

1 to 2 medium garlic cloves, minced, pressed or grated on a microplane

2 tablespoons mayonnaise

1 tablespoon fresh lime juice

Chile powder or hot chile flakes to taste

Heat the oil in a large nonstick skillet or wok over high heat until shimmering. Add the corn kernels, season to taste with salt, toss once or twice, and cook without moving until charred on one side, about 2 minutes.

Toss the corn, stir, and repeat, until charred on second side, about 2 more minutes. Continue tossing and charring until the corn is charred on all sides, about 10 minutes total. Dump the corn in a large bowl.

Add everything else and toss to combine. Taste and adjust seasoning with salt and more chile powder to taste. Serve immediately.

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION: I managed to lose the ingredients line for the minced onion in Mrs. Finch's Excellent Cole Slaw recipe in my last column—so the only clue was a comment on the onion's performance in storage. MIA was 1/8 cup minced red onion, in case you need to add it to a printed-out recipe.

Here's the whole list of ingredients to make it easier to use this very good recipe:

1 small cabbage, shredded thinly with a knife

1/8 cup minced red onion

½ teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon sugar

3 tablespoons cider vinegar

¼ cup Duke's mayonnaise

1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Mix everything together and you're good to go.

Stan says the cole slaw will be good the next day after a night in the fridge, though the onion will be a stronger presence.

Score—at least once a summer I like to pick up some Mexican fruit popsicles, paletas, usually at my nearest source, the Mexican market on the corner right across from The Dog House in Boone Square in Hillsborough. Look for the big cactus plant in a big pot on the corner. In the freezer case I spied some interesting looking coconut ice cream packed into real coconut shells and of course I had to buy some. What a delicious treat! There's even a little wooden spoon inside, so you could in theory produce ice cream for dessert in the middle of nowhere, on a hike or at a beach picnic already in its own bowl with its own spoon. All you'd need is some blue ice packs and a small cooler. Pachito's ice cream is the brand, out of Miami—Coco Glacée.

Mebane City Beat: Rail replacement and what to expect

BY KELLY HUNTER
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS OF ORANGE

If you travel through Mebane regularly, you will soon see some changes along our railroad corridor. Beginning Monday, August 24, railroad crossings throughout Mebane will temporarily close as crews begin replacing aging rail as part of a major investment in North Carolina's transportation infrastructure.

The Carolinian and Piedmont Passenger and Freight Improvements (CAPPFI) project is a federally funded effort designed to improve the safety, reliability and long-term performance of the rail corridor between Greensboro and Raleigh. The North Carolina Railroad Company (NCRR), in partnership with Norfolk Southern, is replacing up to 69 miles of aging rail along the corridor.

Why is the rail being replaced?

Like any infrastructure, railroad tracks eventually reach the end of their service life and must be replaced. The observed age of the rail along the Greensboro-to-Raleigh corridor dates back to the 1970s, making replacement necessary to maintain a safe and reliable rail system.

Replacing the aging rail will help reduce future maintenance needs, improve reliability, enhance safety and provide smoother, more efficient rail operations. The project will also install new continuously welded rail, eliminating joints and imperfections that can contribute to wear and vibration over time.



CITY OF MEBANE

The rail corridor is an important part of North Carolina's transportation and economic network. Economic activity along the North Carolina Railroad corridor supports more than 15,000 jobs with direct rail-served businesses and contributes approximately $247 million in annual tax revenue.

The CAPPFI project is one of nine rail projects funded through the federal Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grant program, administered by the Federal Railroad Administration. The grant includes a $105.6 million federal investment in North Carolina's rail corridor, awarded in December 2025. With additional investments from the North Carolina Railroad Company (NCRR), Norfolk Southern and the North Carolina Department of Transportation, the overall project represents approximately $170 million in rail improvements.

When will the work happen in Mebane?

Phase 1 of the rail replacement work is scheduled to begin in Mebane on Monday, August 24, at the Redman Road crossing. From there, crews will conduct rolling closures along up to 34 miles of the rail corridor between Mebane and Greensboro, with work expected to continue from late August through September.

In Mebane, the affected railroad crossings include Redman Road, Buckhorn Road, Mattress Factory Road, Fifth Street, Fourth Street, Third Street, Moore Road, and Gibson Road.

Work is expected to take place Monday through Thursday, beginning around 6 a.m., but the timing will vary depending on the location and construction activity. Because the work is mobile and dependent on rail operations, exact closure timing may not always be known far in advance.

Phase 2 of the project will address the remaining section of rail between Efland and Raleigh and is expected to take place in 2027.

What will this mean for residents?

The most immediate impact will be temporary road closures at railroad crossings while crews complete the rail replacement work.

The work requires specialized equipment and uninterrupted access to the railroad, meaning vehicles will not be able to cross the tracks at an active work site. Norfolk Southern will utilize its specialized engineering team, R3 Dual Rail Gang, which is designed to replace both rails simultaneously. This approach allows crews to remove and replace the left and right rails at the same time, reducing the total amount of time needed on the track compared with traditional maintenance crews that work on one rail at a time.

As part of the process, the R3 Dual Rail Gang will remove the existing rail and crossing surface, replace the aging rail, and restore the crossing with new rail and asphalt. Once the new asphalt is installed, the crossing will remain closed

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for at least 24 hours while the asphalt cures and is deemed safe for traffic. Norfolk Southern aims to replace approximately 2 to 3 miles of track per day.

The closures are expected to last approximately two to five days at each crossing, although the schedule is subject to change based on weather, construction progress, and rail operations. Norfolk Southern currently anticipates completing work at all Mebane railroad crossings by Thursday, August 27. However, even after construction work is complete, the asphalt may still be curing at certain crossings. This means a crossing may remain closed for safety even if you no longer see active construction crews at the site.

Residents and motorists should plan ahead, follow posted detour signs, and allow additional travel time when traveling through areas affected by the closures.

Access to homes and businesses will be maintained from alternate directions where possible. While a particular railroad crossing may be closed, local businesses will remain open and accessible from alternate routes.

Because of the nature of the work, residents may not always receive extensive advance notice before a particular crossing closes. NCRR is coordinating with Norfolk Southern, NCDOT, local governments, emergency responders, schools and businesses to provide information as soon as closure schedules are available.

What about emergency services and schools?

Emergency services and school transportation officials are being notified of the planned closures and provided with crossing-specific closure and detour information. The City of Mebane is also coordinating with local police, fire, schools and other partners to help ensure the community can safely navigate the temporary impacts.

As always, if you have an emergency, call 911.

Who is responsible for the project?

NCRR is not a state agency and operates independently. NCRR is the federal grant recipient and is leading public communications and coordination with local municipalities. Norfolk Southern is performing the rail construction work.

The City of Mebane's role is to help provide residents, businesses, and other community members with accurate, timely and localized information about the work and its impacts.

Where can I find updates?

Because construction schedules can change based on weather, construction progress and rail operations, residents should check regularly for the latest information.

The City of Mebane will share updates through its website and social media channels as information becomes available. Residents can also visit the North Carolina Railroad Company's CAPPFI project webpage at ncrr.com/cappfi-new-rail/ for project information and construction updates.

Residents should not expect significant changes to train speeds, frequency, noise or freight traffic as a result of the project. The primary benefit will be safer, more reliable and efficient rail operations and service.

While temporary railroad crossing closures may create inconveniences for residents, businesses and visitors, the work is an important investment in infrastructure that serves Mebane and communities throughout North Carolina.

Rail infrastructure is built to serve generations. Replacing aging rail today helps preserve one of North Carolina's key transportation assets, ensuring it continues to support residents, businesses, and visitors well into the future. The improvements being made through CAPPFI will strengthen the rail network for decades to come, supporting safer travel, more reliable service and continued economic growth across the state.

FAIRVIEW

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• Growing Fairview's Community Garden: Interns researched the best ways to expand the Fairview Community Garden. They recommended adding accessible garden beds, seating, and fruit trees.

• Creating Space for Fairview Teens: Interns explored how to better serve local teens. They recommended creating a teen room at the Dorothy N. Johnson Community Center and offering more activities and outings.

This summer's research builds on the Activate! Fairview Active-Living Plan. The plan was shaped by previous Fairview Youth in Action interns and identifies community priorities related to safe streets, public spaces, parks, and healthy food.

Walk Fairview Day also gave the community a chance to celebrate how earlier ideas are taking shape. Over the past year, new landscaping and an expanded rain garden were added at the Dorothy N. Johnson Community Center. Work also began on the Seasons of Fairview mosaic, a new public art project planned for installation later this fall.

At Fairview Park, temporary soccer goals were installed and the Rainey Avenue shortcut was improved. The Town of Hillsborough also committed funding to begin planning a future sidewalk along Rainey Avenue.

This year's Walk Fairview Day also marked an important milestone for the program. In 2025, federal cuts eliminated the SNAP-Ed funding that had supported Fairview Youth in Action and other community health programs in Fairview. The loss placed the internship's future in doubt, as reported following last year's Walk Fairview Day.

The Town of Hillsborough stepped in to help fund the 2026 internship, allowing Fairview Youth in Action and Walk Fairview Day to continue.

"Last year, we were not sure if we would be able to bring the internship back this summer. That is when the Town of Hillsborough stepped in," said Kevin Giff, Communities on the Move Manager with UNC's Food, Fitness and Opportunity Research Collaborative. "Because of the Town's support, our interns were able to return and continue their work. We truly would not be here without that support."

Elected officials in attendance included Hillsborough Mayor Mark Bell and Town Commissioner Robb English; Orange County Board of Commissioners Chair Jean Hamilton and Commissioners Marilyn Carter and Phyllis

Portie-Ascott; and North Carolina Representative Renée A. Price.

In addition to the guided walk, the event included youth research displays and community resource tables.

Fairview Youth in Action is sponsored by Fairview Community Watch, the UNC Food, Fitness and Opportunity Research Collaborative, and Habitat for Humanity of Orange County. To learn more about Fairview Youth in Action or support its work, visit our website or contact Kevin Giff at giff@live.unc.edu

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