

# Nuts About An Alpine Autumn

Autumn is a wonderful time of year to explore the Victorian Alpine region. The Autumn colours are at their most vivid right now and in the late afternoon sun the poplars take on the look of giant golden torches against the soft dusky grey green of the hills. More common are the liquid amber trees which border the Great Alpine Road from Gapsted to Bright, glowing bright pink, orange and various shades of red. The Victorian alps are not just a feast of colour at this time of year but a feast of wonderful Autumn produce. Walnuts, almonds, chestnuts and hazelnuts are all harvested now and feature in autumnal dishes, like rabbit ragu with chestnut pasta ([Ox and Hound](#)), mushroom pizza with rocket and roasted hazelnuts ([Bridge Road Brewery](#)) or beetroot tarte tartin with honeyed walnuts ([Feathertop Winery](#)). It is great to drop into a farm gate wherever you see a sign on the road and purchase some fresh nuts of the season for your own cooking enjoyment. Last weekend I did just that, turning off near Gapsted to visit [Valley Nut Groves at 180 Schlapp Road](#). The shop at this walnut farm has 500 g, 1 kg, 5kg and 10 kg nets of whole nuts ranging in size from large to jumbo to mammoth as well as two or three different varieties. Behind the shop is the processing shed which is full of historic equipment from previous generations of the Schlapp family. It may all look ancient but each machine including the 1920's drying kiln appears to do the job well in what is still a pretty labour intensive production. The owner is happy to explain the ins and outs of producing walnuts starting from the fleshy outer covering of green walnuts which usually split and drop while still on the tree. Removing any of the outer husk remaining is done at the washing stage, where nuts are tumbled and sprayed with water. The nuts are hand sorted to remove duds and then hoisted by a conveyor to the top of the drying kiln, where they are then shifted as they dry by a series of intricate traps from the highest and hottest position to the lowest and

coolest position over the course of a few days. The sacks of dried walnuts are then sorted according to size in a trommel screen which spits out small, standard, large, jumbo and mammoth nuts into the appropriate sacks below. Magic. Valley Nut Groves do not use any pesticides or chemicals on their trees and nuts are not bleached as imported ones tend to be. These local walnuts are just as nature intended and the cockatoos certainly think so too. In addition to nuts, Valley Nut Groves produce walnut oil, great for salad dressing, and a range of walnut extract hair shampoo and conditioners. If you want to immerse yourself in this nut grove idyll the owner has some converted tobacco kiln [cottage accommodation for rental](#) as well.

Don't be put off by unshelled walnuts. Buy a good nut cracker and approach the task in a relaxed fashion, nibbling a few healthy nuts instead of wicked temptations when hungry. After a day of touring in the fresh Alpine air there is nothing more satisfying than cracking nuts while sipping a local Beechworth wine or King Valley Italian varietal in front of an open fire.



Green Walnuts





Walnuts are washed, any remaining green outer husks removed



Duds are removed by hand on the sorting conveyor



From sorting to kiln





Historic drying kiln



Trommel screening to size

---

## Sweet Sapphire Grapes

Sweet Sapphire grapes, with their elongated, black, knobby bodies, may look more like licorice bullets than grapes and perhaps with their extra sweetness they are more like lollies than fruit. My teenage nephew ate the whole plate I put out with cheeses for Easter dinner, clearly giving them the thumbs up. Sweet Sapphire grapes are not just extra sweet but they also have a deep, dark grape flavour that appeals to young and old alike. Sweet Sapphire or Moon Drops are a new variety bred in California for sweetness and a longer shelf life and although they have a slightly thicker skin, selecting for

these qualities has not meant any loss of flavour. This is surprising as flavour is often the first quality lost when shelf life is sought. In Australia, they are grown in Mildura and also in the Gascoigne river region of Western Australia and are a popular export variety. You can now find them at select green grocers around Melbourne.

---

## End of Summer Tomatoes

As we approach the end of summer it is time to gobble up as many ripe, flavoursome tomatoes as possible. If you want a part of the action then attend a Melbourne farmers market this weekend and enjoy some really great tasting tomatoes. There are so many varieties to choose from and every produce stall will have something on offer. Try something from the large range of heirloom cocktail tomatoes, including the striking golden pears, green zebras, and black Russians and be sure to try the unique, low acid Glenora greens from [Glenora Heritage Produce](#) and the hefty Grandpa's tomatoes from [Fruits of Life](#). Add slices of juicy tomatoes to bread grilled on the BBQ and rubbed with a little garlic for a delicious lunch or dinner entree. You can also pick up a box of Roma tomatoes cheaply and make some passata or sauce to brighten up the winter months.

Click on the Upcoming Markets page to check for a market near you. Glenora Heritage Produce will be attending [Veg Out Farmers Market](#) at Peanut Reserve, St Kilda this Saturday, March 3.





---

## Red Bananas

The red banana or Red Dacca is a relatively unknown banana variety for Melbourne shoppers. I was lucky enough to be introduced to red bananas by Julian, owner of [Senserrick Green Grocer](#) and I must say it has been hard to go back to the Cavendish and Lady Finger after tasting these. Red bananas are much sweeter, have a very creamy texture and a slight flavour of mango. At around \$8 a kilogram they are not the cheapest bananas but if you are a Queenslander or lover of tropical fruits and miss that taste of ripe fruit one only seems to get *in situ* then you will love these. They are a cooler climate variety, so the slow growing seems to increase their sugar production. Red bananas also have a higher beta-carotene and vitamin C content than other varieties. Wait until the skin turns a dull brick red then the flesh will be fully ripe. If your local green grocer doesn't have red bananas ask them and I am sure they will be happy to oblige and get some in for you.

---

## Kensington Pride

Yippee, my favorite mango, Kensington Pride, has come South again. Originally hailing from the Queensland town of Bowen and sometimes called Pride of Bowen they are grown in the Northern Territory as well as Queensland and supplies are plentiful this year. Small KPs from the NT are now selling for

around \$3 and as we enter the summer season the Queensland ones will come on board and then we should be right for mangoes until the end of February. These mangoes have a real mango flavour rather than just being honey sweet; you can guess I am not a huge fan of recent cultivars aimed at longer shelf life and higher flesh to stone ratios. The others are still nice mangoes but as the name suggests KP producers have every right to be proud. I guess that is why despite their erratic seasonal growth they are still the most popular, forming the largest segment of the local mango market. Check out the recipe for mango chia pudding and enjoy mangoes for breakfast or dessert.