

Stories

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## Yes, we have no (local) strawberries

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Hunts Point Terminal Produce Market has it all – but don't look for seasonal fruit grown in New York State

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1 Comment

In early summer – remember summer? – strawberries grown in New York State are at their peak, ready to be plucked straight from the vine at destination farms across the state where customers are encouraged to pick their own pints of red fruit.

In 2011, the most recent year measured, New York farms yielded 3.6 million pounds of strawberries, ranking the state eighth in strawberry production nationally, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

But for those in New York City who don't have the time to visit a local farmer's market or take a two-hour drive upstate, strawberries from California, Chile and Florida are readily available at supermarkets throughout the year.

And Hunts Point Terminal Produce Market, the Bronx hub through which three-fifths of the city's produce flows, never sees a single New York State strawberry, even at the peak of their local growing season.

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**BY**

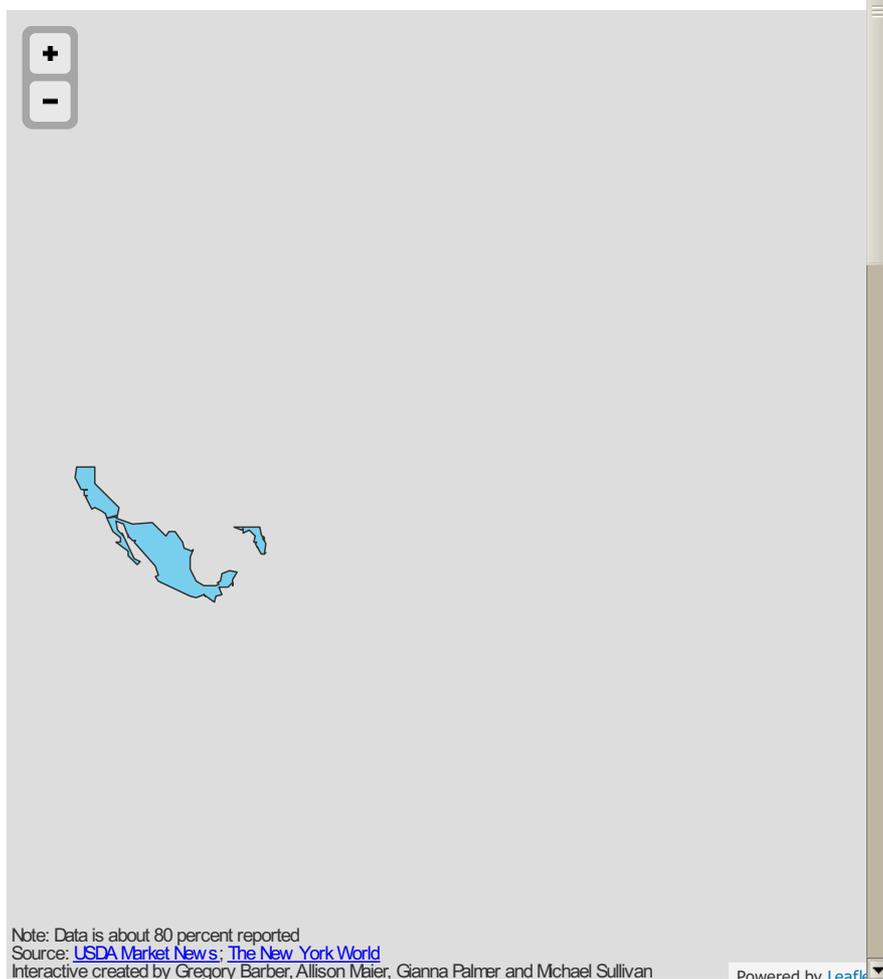
Jie Jenny Zou & Keith Collins

# The New York World

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Origins of **strawberries** shipped to Hunts Point 2012-'13



For the last three years on record, all strawberries sold at Hunts Point Terminal Market originated from no closer than Florida.

“Most of the marketing done with strawberries in New York State is done with the idea that it’s going to be consumed within 50 miles of the patch,” said Paul Baker, executive director of the New York State Berry Growers Association, which includes over 60 growers across the state. “Our industry hasn’t really felt the necessity to go to Hunts Point Market at this point.”

For New York’s berry farms, going wholesale means reduced profits and administrative wrangling. Overhead costs pile on, with packing, transporting and grading the produce before it’s ready to be sold. Harvests vary in size, and the growing season is achingly short — New York berries come to market only in July and August.

Then there’s the Hunts Point market itself. When the manager of Fantasy Fruit Farm, 73-year-old Harvey Fletcher, brought his produce from upstate Chenango County to Hunts Point a few years back, things didn’t go as he’d hoped. Though he tried to interest wholesalers at the market, his farm was unable to sell any of its produce to wholesalers that day.

“We just came away with a total bad taste in our mouth,” he said.

He said Fantasy Fruit has no intention of trying to sell at Hunts Point until the market becomes more receptive to local farmers. To compete at the wholesale level, Fantasy Fruit would need to sell at \$3 per pint. Last season they retailed at an average of \$4.50 a pint — money the company gets to keep when it sells on site or at greenmarkets.

Matthew D'Arrigo, president of the Hunts Point Cooperative, disputes the idea that Hunts Point is not receptive to food grown in New York State. He said that the market "has, and very likely always will be, the largest mover of local produce" in the region, pointing to the market's inclusion of Hudson Valley apple growers.



New York State strawberries abound at Union Square and other greenmarkets come summer – but they're nowhere to be found at the city's own central produce market. Photo: Nicole Marie Edine/Flickr.

D'Arrigo said there's a real economic benefit to including more local producers of heavy or cumbersome items like broccoli, which can be expensive to ship. Lightweight berries, on the other hand, can be flown in at relatively cheap costs from year-round domestic growers in California or from Latin America.

Wholesalers, he noted, are typically less receptive to dealing with small volumes of a type of produce because it becomes difficult to track and then distribute to potentially hundreds of local stores.

"The wholesaler has to make money," he said. "They're doing a vital job."

For New York's strawberry farmers, other profitable outlets include food co-ops and community supported agriculture projects. Gail Hepworth of Hepworth Farms in Milton, New York, uses both: she sells through the Park Slope Food Co-op and to CSA shareholders. Strawberries do not account for a large portion of the food grown at Hepworth Farms, and what is grown sells out quickly.

Hepworth Farms is run by Gail's sister, Amy Hepworth, who says that the personal connection to buyers is crucial to their success. "My sister has built a business based on demand and relationships," Hepworth said. "We grow for food for our customers and, actually, the demand for Amy's food is such that we could grow even more to satisfy our current base of customers."

Generally, Hepworth Farms does also sell produce to distributors at wholesale prices, selected "based on mutual business and growing philosophies," Hepworth said. They would be happy to sell to Hunts Point, she said, if they harvested at a surplus or if their current demand changed in some way.

"Hunts Point is a great market," Hepworth said. "I know as a child we used to sell our fruit there."

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**Elisa Jed** says:

October 4, 2013 at 10:42 am

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