

By Douglas C. Towne

Whether it's a shiny Art Deco Fodero diner or a homespun café whose animated sign has been entertaining motorists for generations, we all have our favorite places to nosh. While these classic culinary establishments are not to be missed, the gastronomic hotspots I plan my trips around almost always lack such unique architectural and picturesque advertisements. They also don't offer menus, silverware, tables, or even a roof beneath which to enjoy their delectable offerings.

Their presence is typically denoted by hand-written cardboard messages tacked onto telephone poles or perhaps by more elaborate plywood signs temporarily situated along the road. They're informal places—sometimes you're requested to honk your car horn for service or just leave your money in the lockbox. Any missing amenities are more than compensated for by the lush backdrop of orchards and farms that generate the fresh fruit and vegetable crops sold at my favorite haunts—roadside produce stands.

Whether spring asparagus cut from sandy Kansas soils, succulent May peaches picked in Blythe, California, cherries in Utah on Independence Day, late-summer watermelon harvested from fields along the Gila River in eastern Arizona, or Anaheim chilies roasted along the roadside in New Mexico's Mesilla Valley during the autumn, this is food worth a detour.

I unequivocally recommend indulging in these harvests—just don't repeat my compunction to haul excessive bounty home as I did one year with Washington onions. Heading back to Arizona, I stopped at a roadside stand for a few Walla Wallas—and left with a hundred pounds of the famous onions stashed in my trunk. Many did not survive the hot drive home and it took months to clear their pungent odor from my vehicle.

Whether onions or oranges, the nation's agricultural delights not only tickles our

taste buds, it has left a colorful legacy of commercial art, most famously with imaginative fruit crate labels. These labels, glued onto the ends of wooden produce boxes, first appeared in the 1870s when an expanded railroad network allowed fresh produce to be shipped nationwide. Growers used distinctive, easily recognized labels to individualize their produce in the marketplace and persuade consumers that their brand was superior. Countless labels were produced, advertising almost 50 different crops grown in nearly half the states, mainly in the West and South, with most originating from California.

The labels were designed by unknown artists, much like roadside signs, and produced using a stone lithograph process on which the label design was etched by hand on imported Bavarian limestone. The printing was done on high quality paper for durability, since the crates served as both transportation containers and bins from which consumers selected their produce. Crates were used until the 1950s, when the advent of supermarket chains reduced the marketing role of independent growers' brand names,



resulting in the increased use of cheaper, pre-printed cardboard boxes.

The labels were an advertising cornucopia of attractive, idealized names and images that would hopefully instill positive connotations with consumers: the farm or region where the crop was raised, Native Americans, cowboys, wildlife, a theme or lifestyle of the era, athletic pursuits, a humorous play on words, or more personalized images of the grower's pet, sweetheart, or child. Some labels such as "4U Sebastopol Quality Apples" were even precursors to our current text messaging age. Everything from Washington's Blue Mountain apples to California's Bronco Buster vegetables had seemingly distinctive characteristics.

Aside from the feast for the eyes provided by their colorful art, fruit crate labels are of interest to commercial archeologists because their use of appealing names and

symbols to differentiate fruits and vegetables foreshadows what would later be applied to roadside lodges and restaurants. Although it's difficult to quantify the influence of fruit crate art on roadside signage, the connection is clear when examining the Yucca Lemons crate label from Olive, California, and the Yucca Motel sign in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Commercial signs related to agriculture along the roadside also interest highway scholars. Surprisingly, despite our affection for the now largely mythic family farm, this is a little-examined topic. Perhaps this is because these advertisements are relatively rare, often in bad condition and found in industrial or rural areas. Extant signs cover a wide spectrum of food-related activities such as farms, food processors and distributors, and agricultural organizations.

Although they might make some agricultural extension agents cringe, the signs are charming. Three of the more indelible images include the "Soil Magic" logo for a fertilizer so amazing that even the featured country bumpkin can produce a bumper crop. The multifaceted sign at "Farms On The Go! Rosendo Casarez - Owner" that apparently refers not to the farm's soil erosion rates but to its roadrunner symbol, the dynamic nature of the enterprise, and the classy lady cavorting in a champagne-filled saucer at the neighboring bar. It's not a grain dust explosion on the "Spark O Life Feeds" sign but rather a lamb and chick bursting forth because of the inferred excellent livestock reproduction rates resulting from the use of this product. Not all farm-related advertisements are so inspiring or attractive, however. A fading sign on a feed



Opposite: Editor locates Utah cherries, U.S. 89 south of Ogden, Utah; Spark O Life Feeds, U.S. 281, Hardtner, Kansas.

Above: Day and night at the Yucca Motel, U.S. 91, Las Vegas, Nevada; Soil Magic logo, U.S. 91, Downey, Idaho.

All photos by Douglas Towne, fruit crate labels from the author's collection.

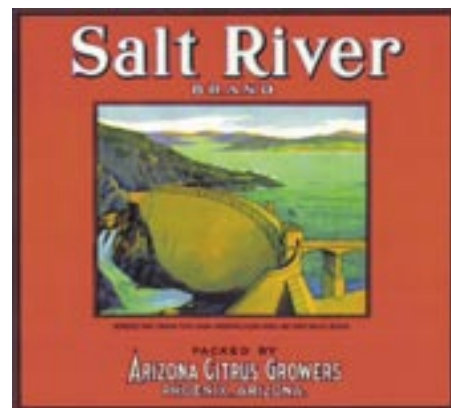
building in Burley, Idaho, a town situated along the Snake River, bluntly reads, "Eat More Meat, Drink More Milk." This is an admonition that, unfortunately, Americans have too frequently taken to heart. The health of both the consumer and the farm has suffered from the ills associated with a single-minded emphasis on production.

While agrarian advertising on signs and labels has left an impressive artistic legacy and a graphic social history, what's their influence on vital issues such as produce quality and farm sustainability? While the associated names and imagery sometimes lacked any connection to the harvest, they did send the important message that it wasn't a fungible commodity, i.e. that not all produce was the same. Moreover, regional images sought to articulate unique terra and climate conditions that could enhance the crop's flavor. Representations of idyllic farm scenes represented the harmonious link between agriculture and nature. This vintage advertising probably rarely lived up to the reality,

yet these images provided a foundation for future marketing ideas.

Today, agricultural promotion has come full circle, with consumers increasingly interested in where and how their produce is grown. These vintage and current influences are present at Adam's Antique Apples roadside produce stand near Globe, Arizona. The alliteration and schoolboy image are throwbacks to early fruit label advertising while the emphasis on a pesticide-free ("No Spray" and "Organic") and heirloom varieties ("Antique") reflect modern concerns.

As farmers look back to discarded agrarian methods to produce healthier crops in a more sustainable manner, perhaps they will recognize the important role fruit crate art and agrarian roadside images served in selling the harvest. This successful marriage of art and agriculture serves to bridge the gap between farms and the people they feed, and is as vital today as it was when all produce was organically grown and our crops were genetically diverse. ●

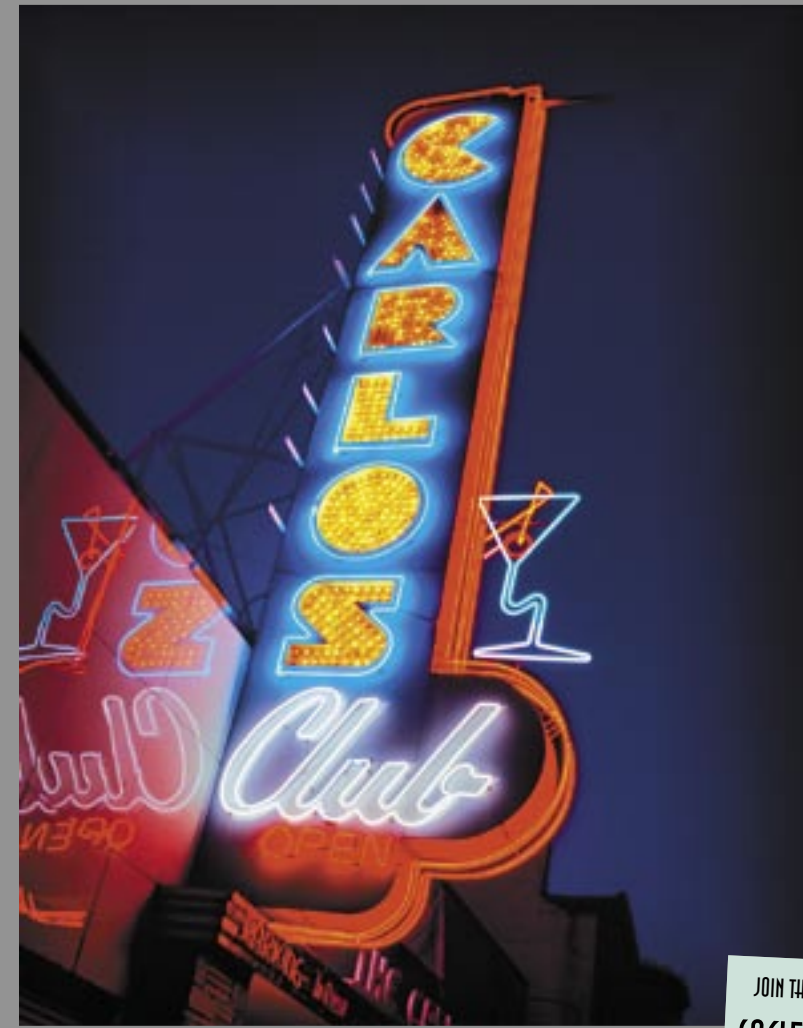


Clockwise from top: Farms on the Go!, State Highway 2 near Roswell, New Mexico; Bonita Bean Company, near State Highway 191, Kansas Settlement, Arizona; Salt River Brand Citrus, Arizona Citrus Growers, Phoenix, Arizona; Adam's Antique Apples, U.S. 60 near Superior, Arizona; Eat More Meat, Drink More Milk, U.S. 30, Burley, Idaho.

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