

Published April 10th, 2013

Happy Birthday to Moraga Produce!

By Susie Iventosch



Photos Susie Iventosch

Just one year ago, Roberto Cortez along with his parents and two siblings, opened Moraga Produce in the Rheem Shopping Center. This market is a great resource for finding all sorts of fruits and vegetables, and is very convenient. We all love farmers' markets, but you cannot always get there on 'market' day, so it is sure nice to have an option like Moraga Produce, that focuses on produce and is open daily.

I was quite curious how the family arrived at the decision to open such a specialty store in Moraga, so I caught up with Cortez for a little history.

"When I was a business administration major at Cal State East Bay, I worked for a market in Concord that was owned by a Korean couple," Cortez said. "Then one day, the husband died and his wife decided to sell the business. That's when I got the idea to buy the store."

A new graduate with his business degree, Cortez had a vision and made a proposal to his parents that the family buy the store, since he was familiar with how it operated and had worked there for many years. Besides, he had just finished college and was looking for his next move.

"They agreed and together with my brother and sister

we took over the store in 2007," he noted. "This is a family-run business."

Apparently, things went very well, and in 2009 they opened Walnut Creek Produce at the corner of Olympic and Tice Valley.

According to Cortez, because the Concord store is very close to Costco, customers from the Lamorinda area liked to stop by Concord Produce when they made their Costco runs.

"I had so many customers that kept asking us to open a store in the Lamorinda area, and finally we decided to start looking for a spot. We found a good one and that is how we came to open Moraga Produce last April," Cortez said.

So, there you have it! And, now, we have Moraga Produce!

Cortez and his dad drive into San Francisco every morning to pick up inventory from two farmers' markets and they try to purchase locally-grown product when it's available. Currently, many of the fruits are coming in from Mexico and Chile, but soon the locally-grown cherries, peaches, nectarines and plums will be arriving and, already, they are selling strawberries from northern California.

On a recent stop, my basket was packed to the brim, full of colorful produce! I picked up two delicious ruby red grapefruit, which though from Texas, were quite small, but very sweet and juicy. I discovered Yosemite Gold tangerines, quite large for a tangerine, but very sweet and easy to peel, and something I'd not seen before. Everything from tomatoes, avocados, cilantro and leeks to cabbage, papaya, eggplant and strawberries came home with me that day. It was a fiber extravaganza! But, maybe the best of all was the thinner-than-a-pencil asparagus that we grilled for this week's recipe. In fact, before we grilled it, I had it sitting on the counter with a little olive oil and sea salt, and my husband began eating it raw!

Cortez says that he can accommodate special orders by the case, so all of you who love to do canning and put up preserves can keep that in mind. The prices are very reasonable and he personally selects the produce daily for the markets. The store also stocks an assortment of organic produce in addition to a selection of local dairy products and Semifreddi's bread.

"We like to offer our customers a good value and a great selection of produce, available every day!"

Moraga Produce

576 Center Street, Moraga, Ca.

(925) 377-1000

Lemon Orzo with Grilled Asparagus and Eggplant

(Serves 6 as a side dish, or three to four as a main dish)

INGREDIENTS

1 eight ounce package orzo

1 lemon, zested and juiced (about 1/4 cup lemon juice and 1 to 2 teaspoons zest)

1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil (may need slightly more, to taste)

1 shallot, finely diced, sauteed in olive oil until translucent

1 clove garlic, minced

1/4 cup chopped parsley

1/2 teaspoon salt (I used 6 grinds on my Costco Himalayan

-pink salt grinder)

1/2 teaspoon black pepper

Asparagus- half bunch skinny asparagus spears (I used the very skinny ones, but if you cannot find those, then use about 10 spears of regular asparagus.)

Japanese eggplant, 1 to 2, depending upon the size and your taste

1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan

2 tablespoons pine nuts, toasted

DIRECTIONS

Cut tough ends from asparagus. Cut eggplant into 1/2-inch thick slices. (No need to remove skin.) Brush both veggies with olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Barbecue over medium-high heat, just until cooked al dente, and a little bit browned. Cool to room temperature. Cut asparagus into 3/4 to 1-inch pieces, and cut eggplant into bite-sized cubes.

Cook orzo according to directions to al dente, drain and place in large bowl. Toss with olive oil and add lemon juice and zest, cooked shallot, garlic, parsley, asparagus, eggplant and 1/4 cup of the Parmesan. Serve at room temperature and garnish with remaining Parmesan and toasted pine nuts.

Reach the reporter at: suziven@gmail.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA