

WORTH THE TRIP

THE ORCHARD

BY JOSH OZERSKY

MIDWOOD—The Orchard, the greatest fruit store in New York City and possibly the world, sits on an unloved stretch of Coney Island Avenue, surrounded by discount clothing stores, Judaica shops and schnitzel bars. It's been a requisite stop on my Brooklyn tour itinerary for years, whether the guests are visiting dignitaries or difficult-to-impress food writers. (Were it not for the godlike presence of Dom DeMarco a few blocks away at Di Fara Pizza, it would be the high point.)

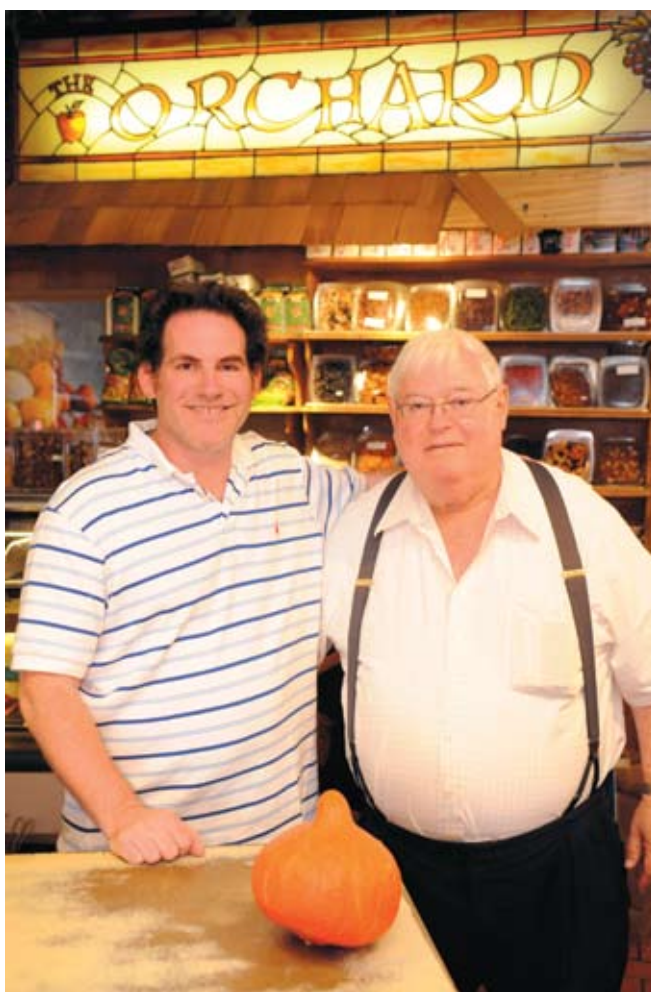
The narrow, 50-year-old store features dizzying displays of perfect Haitian mangoes, Matisse peaches, figs you'd swear contain raspberry jam, specialty Asian fruits in foam shrouds, tropical treats getting Tiffany's treatment. There are also fruit salads, smoked fish and shelves of honey and preserves, but I've never seen anyone so much as pick one up. The focus—or should I say obsessive devotion—is on fresh fruit. People come here from all over the city to purchase fruit at astronomical prices. The reason is simple: It's the best.

"Go look at other fruit stores. You think they can sell our fruit? They can't get it. They don't have the knowledge," says Daniel Spitz, the store's white-haired owner, frequently seen nibbling on whatever's in. "Mainly, their customers won't pay for this. Are their customers going to pay \$7 a pound?"

The Orchard's policy is to sleuth out the best fruit in the world and charge whatever they need to to make a small profit. This can mean asking three or four dollars for a single perfect peach—a common practice in Japan, where spectacular fruit is understood as a luxury, but otherwise anathema in Midwood, where housewives still haggle over the price of raisins.

Flying in produce from distant continents goes against New York's prevailing culinary orthodoxy, which puts seasonal and local at the moral center of the food universe. "Our fruit is all from small farms," says Daniel's son and business partner, Mitch, a friendly, menschy man in his 40s who spends a good amount of time talking to customers. "They're just not around here."

Daniel chimes in. "Did you try our melons? They're from Turlock, California. Hector! Bring me one of those melons." Most conversations at the Orchard are punctuated by the appearance of the object in question, accompanied by a knife. "Other stores aren't going to carry this melon. Try it!" Mitch dispenses tastes,



Photographs: Michael Harlan Turkell

(Fruit) basket cases: Mitch Spitz and his father Daniel work around the clock in December filling holiday orders.

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knowing their powers of conversion—a thick yellow piece of an Indian peach, vivid as gelato, or a clementine section that explodes with sweetness.

“We were the first one to bring fresh pineapples to New York,” recalls Daniel. “It was 1968. No one had them. It was only in cans.”

I remember the first time I tried a stone fruit at the Orchard; it was like stepping into sunlight after a lifetime under fluorescent bulbs. Still, locals are seldom seen in the shop, which depends on discerning, freespending gourmards from beyond Brooklyn—plus gift baskets, which Mitch estimates make up at least 50 percent of sales.

“We do 400 packages a day during the holiday season,” he says. “The last two weeks of the year I live here. We’re open 24 hours, and I don’t leave.” The baskets, which range from \$60 to \$200, look like a sculpture, an Eden with your name on it. The only thing better than getting one is sending one, which makes you feel like a benevolent Greek deity sending sweet sustenance to a battered hero.

But many, taking a commodity approach to ingredients, balk at prices, which vexes Daniel. Leaning back in a chair, the patriarch reflects ruefully: “Something that’s good—you have to pay for.”

The Orchard: 1367 Coney Island Ave.; 718.377.1799.

