



The first peaches of summer

*“People are crazy for peaches here in the valley at this time of year. Rightly so!”*

**SIMPLE PLEASURES**

# Summer’s Sweetest Salve

At an Amish orchard in Pennsylvania’s Big Valley, people arrive before sunrise for ripe, juicy peaches.

BY LISA DUCHENE Belleville, Pennsylvania

**T**hree horse-drawn buggies. Two pickup trucks. Three cars. I eyed the gathering in the gravel lot in front of the big white weathered barn at the Amish orchard on Back Mountain Road, and I parked carefully.

In the cool summer morning, we all quietly looked each other over, wondering how long we may have to wait for fresh-picked peaches—or if we would get any at all.

I’d hardly expected to be first at just after 7 a.m. Even a transplant like me knows when they say “early” in Pennsylvania’s Big Valley they mean about 4 a.m.,

maybe sooner. By then, our farm town is wide awake. Traffic zips along the main road, slicing through the cornfields that blanket the valley bottom and stretch to the base of the mountain ridges.

Yesterday, the woman at our butcher shop in town had directed me to another orchard and said she’d heard from a woman who’d arrived before 5 a.m. and was sixth in line.

People are crazy for peaches here in the valley at this time of year. Rightly so. Summer’s sweet essence lives in the juicy, delicate flesh of a ripe peach. So eighth in line wasn’t so bad. We all knew

who among us was already there when we arrived and who had come later. We knew our place.

A chestnut horse pulling an open wagon emerged from the trees and trotted into view, stopping in front of the barn. Two Amish boys held the reins and stood on the buckboard. Not quite teenagers, one wore a bachelor’s button blue shirt and the other a pale blue one—the familiar, vibrant hues of Big Valley.

Reddish orange peaches filled 18 wheat-colored half-bushel baskets in the wagon bed. A beautiful abundance! The next person in line asked for five bushels—10 baskets. Six more people ahead of me.



The boys unloaded baskets, gently placing them on the gravel drive near the buyer’s buggy or truck, then moved on to the next person—often asking to determine who was next, as we’d parked in a formation more like tossed seeds than a line.

When the boys had finished and the horse had rested a bit, one boy nudged the horse backward then toward the trees. Then each boy placed a foot in a broken-in, familiar spot and climbed back to his driving position. The horse’s metal shoes and the wagon’s wheels clattered on the pounded dirt lane as the wagon climbed slightly and disappeared again into the orchard. More peaches were to come.

As they picked the next load, a few of us helped the woman with five bushels transfer her treasures from the baskets to boxes. Peaches cannot be dumped. Each one must be gently moved by hand to avoid bruising the skin.

We waited and chatted about our peachy plans. One woman said she



Amish boys pick and deliver bushels of ripe peaches by the wagon load to folks waiting in line.

could already taste the first cobbler she would make. Mine would be grilled that Saturday at our annual summer party. Our local family and friends, plus a few carloads of out-of-town guests, gather to celebrate the best of summer: fresh tomatoes, roasted corn, grilled peaches, a swim in the lake and catching up.

As the sun rose higher and the morning warmed, the peach ladies and I chatted with each other and with the mother of the Amish family who owns the orchard. She explained that the drought had cut the peach harvest in half and made them sweeter. The apples would be down, too, she said, but they were thankful for the harvest, whatever the amount.

The wagon came and went two more times. Five and then 10 more cars snaked down the lane. People milled and watched. Some napped in their cars.

We waited. So did the dirty breakfast dishes in my sink, the emails, the preparations for the party and soon-to-arrive guests. No matter. By then I was invested and enjoying the community, cool air and gorgeous scenery.

Finally, I left with two half-bushel baskets—one of Redhaven and another of John Boy.

That first bite was a delicious rush of nectar on my tongue. It belongs to all that is wonderful about summer. A splash of cold water on a hot, humid afternoon. Floating on a river. Mountain pies over the campfire. Fireflies dancing above the cornfields. Cool, soft sheets on tired feet at the end of the day. The crack of a home run off a wooden bat.

Take the time to savor these pleasures of summer—for they are both fleeting and the salve to all of our worries, aches and ordeals, the swift passage of time, the kids growing up too fast. All of it held at bay for awhile. ☼

Lisa Duchene is a writer, essayist and transplant to Pennsylvania’s Big Valley. Visit [lisaduchene.com](http://lisaduchene.com) for more stories.