**Epitaph for a Peach, and for the Sweetness of Summer** by DAVID MAS MASUMOTO

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DEL REY, Calif. — The last of my Sun Crest peaches will be dug up this fall. A bulldozer will crawl in, rip each tree from the earth and toss it aside; the sounds of cracking limbs and splitting trunks will echo through my fields. My orchard will topple easily, gobbled up by the power of the diesel engine and metal rake and my acceptance of a fact that is unbelievable but true: No one wants a peach variety with wonderful taste.

Yes, wonderful. Like many of the older fruit varieties, Sun Crest tasted great, like a peach was supposed to. The flesh was so juicy that it oozed down your chin. The nectar exploded in your mouth and tickled you with the message, "Aaah, *this* is a peach!" The fragrance enchanted your nose, a natural perfume that could never be captured.

The experience of eating a Sun Crest peach automatically triggered a smile and a rush of summer memories and a childlike joy in the simple, savory pleasures of life.

Sun Crest was one of the last remaining truly juicy peaches. When you washed that treasure under a stream of cooling water, your fingertips instinctively searched for the "gushy" side of the fruit. Your mouth watered in anticipation. You leaned over the sink to make sure you wouldn't drip on yourself. Then you sank your teeth into the flesh, a primal act, a sensory celebration that summer had arrived.

My dad planted our orchard 20 years ago, and those trees paid for my college tuition. But stricter and stricter quality standards coupled with a declining demand cut deeply into production levels. Our original 15 acres and 1,500 trees was down to a small patch of 350 this summer.

Every year, produce brokers advised me to get rid of the Sun Crests. "Better peaches have come along," they assured me, "peaches that are redder, fuller in color, with smoother skin--and last for weeks in storage."

"Consumers love the new varieties," the brokers said. "They won't buy Sun Crest."

And my sales returns at the end of each season seemed to verify that. Demand was weak and I had to accept lower prices. But I couldn't give up. I often pictured a shopper picking a Sun Crest out of one of my boxes, not knowing that a good taste was hidden inside like a secret, and then biting into it and saying, "Hey, this actually tastes great! I must have been lucky to get a good one."

So I hung on to those old peach trees for years, rationalizing that it was worth keeping something that had meaning beyond monetary rewards. But this year I became scared. Scared because I couldn't sell my peaches; thousands of boxes blacklisted with a bad reputation sat in cold storage. Boxes that had been paid for, fruit that had cost me and my family a year's labor, a year wasted, unproductive and impotent.

For many family farmers with fruit varieties like Sun Crest peaches, it's now not how much they earn but how much they owe. Can you imagine working an entire year and having your boss inform you that you owed *him* money? No matter what you believe in, you can't farm for very long and be rewarded only with good-tasting peaches.

This season we are seeing not only the death of a peach variety but also the continuing death of the family farmer; the gradual extinction of a breed and a livelihood, a fruit no longer valued and a way of life no longer valid. Along with these perished our window into a world where hard work was honestly rewarding, a labor that truly produced life and gave it a flavor.

I knew that I would never make a fortune in farming but I hoped that I could be rich in other ways, and maybe, just maybe, my work would create some other kind of wealth in the process.

I will survive. The family farmer is a tough breed and we will find ways to continue. But when I think of that Sun Crest orchard, it hurts to see a slice of our life ripped out, and flavor lost along with meaning. My orchard will yield to the bulldozer and the trees will tumble without a fight. We will set a match to them and listen to the crackling of dry leaves and dead branches engulfed by the rising flames. The cinders, lasting for days, will glow in the chill of the fall night.

I'll come out daily and watch the fire, my face and arms warmed by the heat of the burning wood. Then I'll plow the ashes back into the earth. The ground will be renewed, and I'll hope my next orchard will grow up as rich.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why is Masumoto writing this? What (if anything) do you think he hopes to achieve?
2. What emotions does he seem to be trying to stir up in his audience? Mark any lines or passages that seem designed to trigger an emotional response.
3. Did this affect your own emotions? If so, how?
4. What information about himself does Masumoto include that might help establish his credibility, earn the respect of the audience? What do *you* think of him?
5. Masumoto is a farmer, not a poet, but he uses some effective figurative language and vivid descriptions. Mark some of these as you see them, and consider how they shape your response to the piece.
6. This might seem like a personal lament for a failing family business, but it is also a statement about changing food values. Try to find or articulate a thesis statement in this, one that makes an arguable claim and supports it with at least one reason (maybe given in a “because” clause).
7. If you were to respond to this (as many did when it was printed in the newspaper), what might you say to the writer. What would you advise him to do?