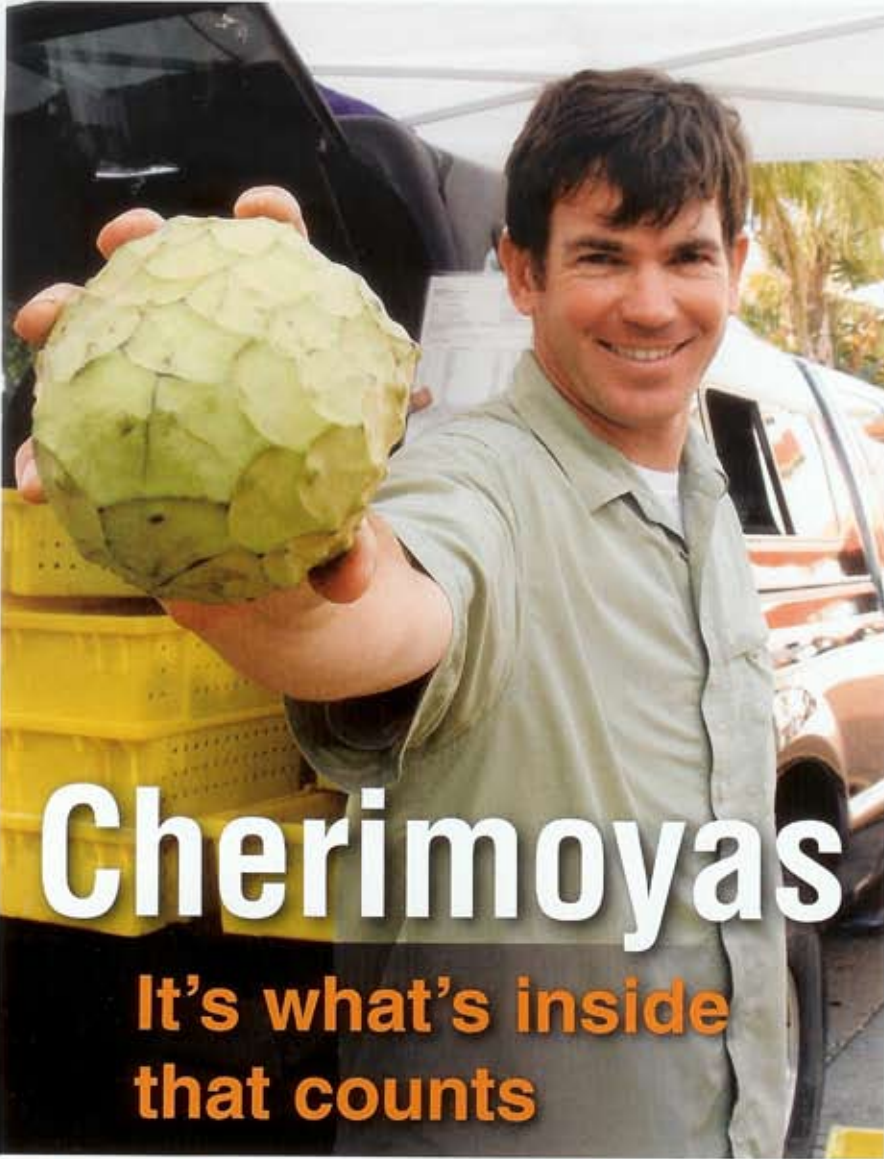


Story and photos by **Tracy Sellers**

Cherimoyas

**It's what's inside
that counts**



The cherimoya may not be much to look at, but venture beyond its rough, armadillo-like exterior and you'll be rewarded with a velvety surprise that Mark Twain once described as "deliciousness itself."

"Cheri-what?" you might ask.

"The cherimoya is a subtropical fruit that grows in California, but only in select pockets along the coast," explains Jay Ruskey of Calimoya Exotic Fruits in Goleta. "At first glance, it looks like an artichoke. But once it's soft and ripe, it has a custard-like texture and a tropical, ambrosia-like flavor that is reminiscent of pineapple, mango and papaya. It just depends on what your taste buds interpret."

Considered a pioneer in the cherimoya world, Ruskey first learned about the fruit—pronounced "cher-uh-moy-uh"—when he attended Cheremoya Elementary School in Los Angeles. Then in 1991 he began cultivating them as an alternative to avocados—yet another subtropical fruit that thrives in Santa Barbara County's near-subtropical climate. In fact, so many unique things grow there that if Salinas is considered the salad bowl of the world, Santa Barbara might be the exotic fruit bowl of the world.

Ruskey's 200-acre ranch in the hills above Santa Barbara is home to as many as 100 different varieties of fruit from all over the world. His cherimoyas are a labor-intensive crop, requiring hand pollinating, careful monitoring and delicate handling. Harvest typically begins in mid-January and lasts until sometime in June.

As for eating the fruit, Ruskey suggests a simple approach: Slice into wedges or halves and scoop out the flesh with a spoon, avoiding the skin and the seeds.

First cultivated by the Incas in Peru and Ecuador, the cherimoya is believed to be one of the oldest fruits of the New World. Today Ruskey hands out sample after sample to eager customers at the Santa Barbara Farmers Market, introducing them to one of the best-tasting fruits they've probably never heard of.

"What turns people off is the looks of it," said customer Lucy Cantea. "It looks weird but once you taste it, it's insanely good."

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Grower Jay Ruskey enjoys introducing farmers market customers to the cherimoya, which he describes as one of the best-tasting fruits they've probably never heard of.

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