EMPIRE OF THE ORANGE

Our guide to the past, present, beautiful and vanishing and flavor of Southern California’s citrus country

BY MATTHEW JAFFE
AGHOASTLY SWEETNESS, THE SCENT OF ORANGE BLOSSOMS fills the air as I drive along Interstate 10 late on a spring night.

The freeway is quiet, almost empty on this stretch just west of Redlands. In the darkness, the blossoms’ perfume has an intoxicating effect. It seems to come from another era.

There was a time—really not that long ago—when the fragrance was common throughout Southern California. The orange was a symbol of promise as powerful as the Gold Rush, although in the popular imagination the orange didn’t represent the quick riches that gold did. Instead it symbolized a gentler way of life. For some, including the dust bowl immigrants portrayed in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, it was the very object of hope. “I like to think how nice it’s gonna be, maybe, in California,” says Ma Joad, “Never cold. An’ fruit ever place, an’ people just bein’ in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees. I wonder—that is, if we get jobs an’ all work—maybe we can get one of them little white houses.”

Dr. Greifswald puts it, “But we get out to California where I can pick me an orange when I want it.”

Beyond the images, the orange was an economic dynamo, financially more important to the state than the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill. The orange helped build Southern California. Ironically, the growth citrus brought eventually meant the end of the way of life it had promised—and of the Orange Empire it had built.

But on this night as I drive along the interstate, the groves have briefly and hauntingly reclaimed their domain. They have also helped me share a moment with my father. Growing up in the Midwest, I used to hear his tales of the years the family had spent in Whittier before I was born. There were lots of stories. But none were more powerful than his descriptions of how he would roll down the car windows while driving down Whittier Boulevard to breathe deep the almost overwhelming perfume, “That’s California. That’s what it’s all about,” he used to say.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA GOLD

Citrus plants were not always such a visceral part of the landscape. They originated in China and were brought to Europe by Portuguese explorers. The first oranges arrived in the Americas with Christopher Columbus on his second voyage. It took another 300 years before oranges finally made it to California, where they were first cultivated at the San Gabriel Mission around 1804.

In the mid-19th century, the population explosion in Northern California created by the Gold Rush provided a nearby market for the fruit. By 1862, about 25,000 trees grew in the state, most of them in Southern California. But it was the arrival from Brazil in 1873 of the seedless Washington navel variety that revolutionized the citrus industry.

The navel was discovered as a mutant of sorts, growing on a tree that normally bore seeded fruit. Like many other aberrant transplants, it found Southern California to its liking.

Before long, 20,000 acres of the new navel oranges were growing in the Riverside area, thriving in the well-drained decomposed granite soil, cool but frost-free winters, and—typical of the region—imported water, in this case low-saline arsien water carried by the historic Gage Canal from the San Bernardino Mountains.

The navel’s cultivation in Riverside and Redlands roughly coincided with the completion of three rail lines to the region. That opened up eastern markets, and brought new eastern markets and also new residents to Southern California, some lured by tickets as cheap as $1 from St. Louis. Demand for oranges soared, abetted by aggressive marketing by the giant citrus cooperative, Sunkist. And the orange was making the terrain.

“You look down the valley to Riverside six or eight miles away, and the groves are in one solid mass,” wrote renowned pomologist G. Harold Posell in 1934. “It is a miracle, this transformation of a desert country into such a magnificent scene, in about 20 years.”

The money that the orange brought into the region built Riverside. You can still find evidence of the orange wealth in the lines of palm trees that once marked off groves, in the lush landscaping of old farmhouses, and in the Arts and Crafts bungalows whose chimneys and front porches were often built of local mountain and river stone. It is the California of the mind.

But the great notions of Southern California in the American Mediterranean were short-lived. After World War II, rapid urbanization and the attendant four-horsemen of the agricultural apocalypse—among, freeways, soaring real-estate prices, and vandalism—hit the citrus industry hard. Today, the bulk of the navel crop is grown in the Central Valley. Only 2,500 acres or so remain in cultivation around Riverside, with another 4,888 acres of citrus in Redlands. Much of the local crop is premium quality and is shipped to Japan and Hong Kong, where oranges are regarded as a delicacy.

Boom, decline, stabilization: it is a brief history, compressed enough to be contained within the lifetime of a single tree at the corner of Arlington and Magnolia avenues in Riverside. This progenitor of millions is one of the original navel orange trees sent to Riverside farmers Eliza and Luther Tibbetts in 1873. It’s still producing fruit.

“The Shine”

Near that corner, Victoria Avenue runs southwest for 7 miles through the remnants of the old navel orange district. Lined by palms and eucalyptus and split by a median splash with the blossoms of orange myrtle trees and rose bushes, Victoria Avenue feels like a living artifact of a lost civilization. Which, in a sense, it is.

At 84, Emilie Ubran is about 20 years...
Lyle estimates that only about 10 percent of grove owners in Ojai were. But he and Karen grew up in the groves of Orange County. For them oranges are a way of life.

“Growing up, the last thing I wanted was an orange grove,” he says. “But now I realize, where do you find a better place to live? I just went back down to Orange County. It’s the damnest place I’ve ever seen.”

Karen’s family farmed Valencia, a variety developed in Orange County in 1872. It thrived in the coastal plains, and through the 1940s Orange County alone had 68,000 acres of Valencias in production. That changed quickly. At the same time the Municipal Market in Santa Ana had descended upon the area, a virus disease struck the groves. For many farmers, selling off their increasingly impoverished investment provided a quick escape and plenty of money to start over again in the San Joaquin Valley. Sometimes the offers were just too good to turn down.

Lyle tells the story of his Uncle George. One day a couple of business types in suits approached him and asked if his property was for sale. He had no desire to sell, so figured he would throw out an outrageous figure: $1 per square foot. A week later, the men returned. They were ready to go to escrow.


His spread is part of the parking lot at Disneyland. It’s ironic. Long before they gave way to places like Disneyland, the groves were the tourist attractions. Drive around outside Riverside after a winter storm and you’ll see why. There the green groves roll unbroken toward indigo mountain ranges frosted with snows. Or drive along State Highway 126 in Sonoma County, where citrus—not houses—spread as far as the eye can see. Or pull over on a knoll in the east Ojai Valley, looking out to where the Valencia groves ride the shadowed waves of the Santa Ynez Mountains. That was what California was all about. In a few places, it still is.

Redlands

Of Southern California’s citrus towns, Redlands offers the best hint of what it must have been like to live in the heyday of the Orange Empire. More than 200 turn-of-the-century mansions remain, as do large tracts of orange groves north of Interstate 10 at the California Street exit, and south of Barton Road.

A good guide to the city’s citrus legacy is the Historic Redlands Driving Tour ($5.50, $13 with cassette). It’s available at the Redlands Public Library and the city’s most beautiful buildings. From here you can drive to three well-preserved historic sites—the 400-foot-long block of Fourth Street, the 200 block of Eureka Place (west of Fourth Street) and the 400 block of La Verne Street (east of Cajon Street and south of Fern Avenue). More modern homes can be seen in the Orange and Eureka streets, Stuart Avenue, and Redlands Boulevard. Here you’ll find Old parking lots, a few blocks, and the elegant classical revival Santa Fe Railroad Depot. The depot stands across from The Restaurant of Los Greenhouses, 250 North Orange (792-4149), whose gardens are fired by orange groves.

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The second stop is the A. K. Smiley Public Library, 115 E. North Street. It was built in 1899 as a public library and is now a museum. It contains exhibits on local history, including a model of the city’s first public school. The library also has a collection of historical documents, photos, and maps.

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Downtown is best explored on foot: you’ll find plenty of places to eat and drink in Market and Lime streets, and Mission Inn and University avenues. For a guide to the downtown area, pick up the Riverside Historic Downtown Walking Tour Map at Riverside Convention and Visitors Bureau, 2720 Main Street; 241-6301.

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Another survivor is the old packing houses that have been converted into the Riverside Brewing Company, 339 Mission Inn; 784-2379. More recent is the Riverside

Taking command of the Empire

The historic heart of the citrus industry is the area around Redlands and Riverside. This is nowhere, for the finest oranges in the world grow. But to experience Southern California’s most extensive stands of orange trees, head up to the citrus country in the Santa Clara and Ojai valleys of Ventura County.

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Valley of the Valencias

While citrus crops, particularly the Washington navel orange, found ideal growing conditions in Southern California, their success has depended as much on the efforts of scientists as it has on a match made in heaven. It was an “extraordinarily managed crop,” says Vincent Moses, curator of history at the Orange County Museum of History. “The success of Valencia oranges in the east end of the Ojai Valley, their usefulness in making jam, their ability to thrive in the midst of a citrus grove—this is what makes them so special,” says Lyle. As for his Uncle George’s old spread, it’s Fashion Square Mall in Santa Ana. Karen’s uncle sold out, too.
Municipal Museum, 3580 Mission Inn; (909) 782-5273.

Of course, the don’t-miss attraction in Riverside is the Mission Inn, 3649 Mission Inn; (800) 843-7755. It began as a small adobe guest house and grew right along with Riverside, thanks to owner Frank Miller’s citrus wealth. Room prices range from $105 to $540. For tour information, call (909) 781-8541.

This year, as it did last year, downtown Riverside will host the Sunkist Orange Blossom Festival (April 20 and 21), which features a parade of orange-decorated floats, historic and art exhibits, cooking demonstrations, and entertainment. For details, call (800) 382-8202. Another long-standing citrus festival is San Bernardino’s National Orange Show, from May 23 through 27; (909) 888-6788.

To reach the city’s remaining citrus groves from downtown, drive south on Market, which turns into Magnolia Avenue. After you pass Riverside City College, you enter the Woods Street Historic District. Explore the neighborhood on either side of Magnolia. To shortcut to the groves, turn left at Castle Reagh Place or Beechwood Place to Ramona Drive, then turn right and go about a mile to Victoria Avenue. Victoria runs southwest for almost 7 miles through Arlington Heights Citrus District.

The avenue features a bike path, and you can make easy detours to the left onto country roads that run through the groves for several long blocks and up to the historic Gage Canal. If you continue on Victoria, turn left on Van Buren Boulevard, then left again on Dufferin Avenue, which runs through more citrus groves and takes you shortly to California Citrus State Historic Park; 780-6222. The park has won awards for its general plan, but budget cuts have stalled progress. It’s still worth a visit if you’re in the area, especially on a clear day because it has tremendous, orange crate–label views. Returning, you might want to take Arlington Avenue back to Magnolia to see the Parent Washington Navel Orange Tree, one of the two original trees imported from Brazil in 1873.

Ventura County

The 45-mile-long corridor along State 116 between I-5 and U.S. 101 is the last great citrus-cape in Southern California. Here in the Santa Clara Valley grow Valencia and lemons. While the mostly two-lane highway can be busy, it is still a classic scenic drive that will take you past great farms, most on the south side of the highway.

For a more relaxing drive, point your car down Guiberson Road, which runs parallel to the highway. At Piru, turn left at Torrey Road and follow it 1 1/4 miles to Guiberson, where you turn right. After about 7 miles, with occasional broad views of the valley, the road runs into State 23 south of Fillmore.

From here, you can continue parallel to State 126 by turning left on State 23, then right on Pasadena Avenue. To reach South Mountain Road, which runs to Santa Paula, turn left at Sespe Street. Like Guiberson, South Mountain takes you through the groves for another 6 to 7 miles.

A third way to get out into farm country is to ride the rails with Fillmore & Western Railway Company. Prices start at $14 ($8 for ages 4 through 12); call (805) 524-2546 to reserve. The company offers several trips through the groves on 1940s-era diesels. In late March and April, orange blossoms should be at their peak.

Or bring your bicycle. With its many vintage farmhouses, extensive groves, and relative lack of traffic, the citrus area along South Mountain is perfect for bikes. Street parking is limited, so you’ll have to start from downtown Fillmore. The only high-traffic area (although the shoulder is wide) is the roughly 1-mile stretch along busy State 23 between town and Riverside Avenue. From that point, it’s easy to pedal up and down these quiet roads. Keep in mind, however, that the local farm dogs are surprisingly fast.

The side roads are pleasant, but don’t overlook downtown Fillmore, at the junction of State 23 and State 126. Fillmore may lack the historic grandeur of Redlands, but it does give you a good glimpse of a traditional small citrus community, a scarce species in contemporary Southern California. The town was hit especially hard by the 1994 Northridge earthquake, but its vintage buildings are continually being spruced up.

Santa Paula, too, is worth a stop. For orange-crate labels and other citrus memorabilia, visit the Santa Paula Union Oil Museum, 10th and Main streets, 933-0076; or the very un-general general store called Mr. Nichols, 901 Main, 525-7804. For lodging or a place to eat in town, try Glen Tavern Inn, 134 N. Mill Street, 933-3777 (rooms from $60).

From Santa Paula, drive up State 150 to Ojai, one of Southern California’s most scenic communities. As you descend into the valley, you’re treated to expansive views of the citrus country concentrated in its eastern end. But the real take-your-breath-away perspective is from a spot called Meditation Mount at the east end of Reeves Road.

The hilly landscape is best savored by bicycle. In Ojai, park at Soule County Park off Boardman Road at State 150, then pedal east on the highway for a short stretch before turning left at Gorham Road. Gorham veers right onto Grand Avenue, from which you can take a left onto Carne Road and then a right onto Thacher Road. Thacher climbs to McAndrew Road, but a right here wins you a long descent down to Reeves. Strong cyclists can turn left at Reeves for the climb to Meditation Mount. Mortals can turn right on Reeves to McNell Road and right again through more groves to Grand.

To vary your return, turn left at Grand and then left again at Carne on the way back to the highway, although we recommend backtracking up Carne to minimize time on the highway. Follow Grand to Gorham, where you retrace your route to the park. Round trip is 8 to 9 miles.

Reprinted from February 1996 Sunset Magazine
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