Notes from the Field by Liz Milazzo, Farm Production Manager

A hot day in Santa Cruz! As I write this Monday afternoon, the thermometer reads 96 degrees at 4:30 pm. In my years farming on the coast, we often have a hot spell this time of year, which seems to be the precursor to a first fall rain. I expect we’ll lose a round of tomatoes that will blow up like water balloons, and we may have sunburn on any pears still on the trees. A little heat will give some sweetness to the butternut squash, tomorrow’s arugula harvest will taste “hot,” and the green beans look just plain happy.

We’ve had a successful season so far, and are starting to prep the farm for fall cover crop. My reflections on the season always start with the tomatoes. After two years in a row of cool summers, “farmed” tomatoes are the healthiest plants on the farm, and we tried a new disease-resistant red salad tomato, “Defiant” (from Johnny’s Seeds) that has worked great – a heavy producer and tastes quite good. Some of the potatoes got “oversized” due to an uneven planting, and leaving them in long enough for the small ones to “catch up.” Your CSA has grown for you both the spuds for French Fries, and the tomatoes for catsup!

All minds are concentrated this fall on how to battle the weedy mustard that has been taking over the winter cover crops – battle, or try and redirect Aikido style? Yellow mustard has become the dominant weed and then some in our main field – possibly a sign of low fertility, in which case, a compost application before cover crop would be smart. Mustard does tend to dominate in a dry year under our planting regime where we seed the cover crop on dry soil, and leave it to grow with the rains. Mustard is faster than white oats or bell beans or vetch in creating a shade “blanket,” leaf tip touching leaf tip, shading any plants that are slow growing or slower to germinate. We might try sowing a cover crop mustard that will potentially shade out the weedy mustard. The varieties of mustard available locally for cover crop can grow quite tall and overgrown, and not set a lot of viable seed. Wish us luck!

Welcome students participating in our Fall CSA shares! We are looking forward to sharing the UCSC Farm’s bounty with you!
Shakshuka [Eggs Poached in Spicy Tomato Sauce]

1/4 cup olive oil
5 Anaheim chiles or 3 jalapeños, stemmed, seeded, and finely chopped
1 small yellow onion, chopped
5 cloves garlic, crushed then sliced
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 tablespoon paprika
28 ounces whole peeled tomatoes (with juice)
Kosher salt, to taste
6 eggs
1/2 cup feta cheese, crumbled
1 tablespoon chopped flat-leaf parsley
Warm pitas, for serving

Heat oil in a 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat. Add chiles and onions and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft and golden brown, about 6 minutes. Add garlic, cumin, and paprika, and cook, stirring frequently, until garlic is soft, about 2 more minutes.

Put tomatoes and their liquid into a medium bowl and crush with your hands. Add crushed tomatoes with liquid to skillet along with 1/2 cup water, reduce heat to medium, and simmer, stirring occasionally, until thickened slightly, about 15 minutes. Season sauce with salt.

Crack eggs over sauce so that eggs are evenly distributed across sauce's surface. Cover skillet and cook until yolks are just set, about 5 minutes. Using a spoon, baste the whites of the eggs with tomato mixture, being careful not to disturb the yolk. Sprinkle shakshuka with feta and parsley and serve with pitas, for dipping. Serves 4 to 6

www.smittenkitchen.com; adapted from Saveur

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Apple and Cheddar Scones

2 firm tart apples (1 pound)
1-1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1/4 cup sugar plus 1-1/2 tablespoons for sprinkling
1/2 tablespoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon salt plus additional for egg wash
6 tablespoons unsalted butter, chilled and cut into 1/2-inch cubes plus additional for baking sheet if not lining it with parchment
1/2 cup sharp cheddar, shredded (white is recommended)
1/4 cup heavy cream
2 large eggs

Position a rack at the center of oven and preheat oven to 375 °F. Line baking sheet with parchment paper.

Peel and core apples, then cut them into one-sixteenths. (chunks, not slivers.) Place in a single layer on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper and bake until they take on a little color and feel dry to the touch, about 20 minutes. They will be about half-baked. Let them cool completely. Leave oven on.

Sift or whisk flour, sugar, baking powder and salt together. Set aside. Place butter in the bowl of an electric mixer with a paddle attachment*, along with cooled apple chunks, cheese, cream and one egg. Sprinkle flour mixture over the top and mix on low speed until the dough just comes together. Do not overmix.

*No mixer? Rub the cold butter into the flour mixture with fingertips or pastry blender, hand-chop apples coarsely and mix the rest together with a wooden spoon until combined. Again, don’t overmix.

Generously flour your counter top and place scone dough on top of it. Sprinkle with flour. Use a rolling pin to gently roll (or use your hands to pat) the dough into a 1-1/4-inch thick, 6-inch circle. Cut circle into 6 wedges. Transfer to a baking sheet that has either been buttered or lined with a fresh sheet of parchment paper. Leave at least 2 inches between each scone.

Beat remaining egg in a small bowl with a pinch of salt. Brush scones with egg wash and sprinkle with remaining tablespoon of sugar. Bake until firm and golden, about 30 minutes. With a spatula, remove to a wire rack to cool for 10 minutes.

Note: Scones are best the day they are baked. They can be made ahead of time and stored unbaked in the freezer. Simply brush frozen scones with the egg wash and sprinkle with sugar, and bake for just a couple extra minutes. Makes 6 scones

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Adapted from The Perfect Finish.