The smells can be invigorating. The sharp citrusy tang of the tangerines or oranges hangs in the air while the earthy aroma of branches and soil give an olfactory hint of terroir. The sun, more often than not, is warmlyly welcome as arms reach skyward through the green canopies, dotted with little juicy globes of bright colors.

Gleaning is a sensory experience that not many of today’s Californians have knowledge of. Although the state possesses an abundant agricultural history with landscape once dedicated to orchards and farms, modernity has crept up and slowly eaten away at acreage. Housing tracts have replaced lemon orchards and strip malls have taken big bites out of the orange groves. Most of the state’s citizenry remain disconnected from the land and its bounty beyond a trip to the produce aisle at the supermarket, or a visit to the local farmers’ market.

Not all residents of the state are so unaware of the act of picking. There are some who participate in the activity on a daily basis, but instead of being allowed to take in the total experience of sights, sounds and smells, they toil away, harvesting as much and as fast as possible. They work hard producing the food, making it easy for those of us on the other end of the process to toss the product into a reusable bag or grocery cart without ever giving a thought to where it came from. Unfortunately, these people, who provide us with the abundance of food, are often unable to purchase the very food they harvest and sometimes rely upon food banks for meals.

Enter Rick Nahmias, a professional photographer who has seen firsthand the cruel irony of this harvesting process. He had spent time traveling up and down the state, visually documenting the human cost of feeding America in the California fields with his book *The Migrant Project*, about migrant farm workers.

FRUITANTHROPY
Getting Juicy With It

BY JILL JOHNSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICK NAHMIAS AND MARTHA PENHALL
In 2009, his life took a different turn from simply documenting the food injustices to taking an active part in trying to rectify them. He was walking his dog around neighborhoods in the San Fernando Valley and noticed rotting fruit in driveways. Aware that fresh produce was a rarity in many food pantries, he came up with the idea of picking the fruit before it fell to the ground and delivering it to where it would do some good. At first, he asked friends to help glean, then posted an ad on Craigslist looking for more volunteers. Three months, several hundred pounds of citrus and an extended gleaning volunteer base later, “fruitanthropy” and Food Forward was born.

Volunteers—or “Fruit Loops,” as they are often loving called—were the backbone of operation then, and they still are. The total volunteer base has grown to approximately 3,500, with 300 of those specific to the Ventura area. Gleaning expeditions simply could not happen without these dedicated helpers. When the clarion call for help is sent, they do come, from all over. With an average of 25 picks a month listed on the official Food Forward “Fresh Juice” e-newsletter, or mentioned on their blog, Facebook page or Twitter feed, there is a wide variety of gleaning opportunities. Various types of individuals and even corporate groups looking for team-building outings sign up and venture into the orchards.

What inspires them? “It’s the immediate gratification of seeing what a few hours of fun in the sun can accomplish. Knowing that their picking efforts rescued the fruit, helped the trees and helped provide nutritious offerings at our food bank,” says Martha Penhall. She should know. “My first pick with Food Forward was in Bakersfield, and I got hooked.” She is now heading up the new Food Forward Ventura County (FFVC.)

The Ventura County operation officially took shape in 2010 when Martha, Bob Glatt and his son Ryan decided that they could do a gleaning about once a month and donate the bounty to the Catholic Charities food pantry in Moorpark. Bob handled the transportation, Ryan managed the volunteers and Martha dealt with the devilish details of logistics.

They arranged gleaning sessions in nearly every town from Ventura to Thousand Oaks, from Ojai to Camarillo and multiple destinations in between. They have gleaned and donated a variety of agricultural products including Asian pears, pomegranates, avocados and ubiquitous oranges. Produce was originally delivered to pantries in their own cars, then volunteers offered their trucks. A van was eventually donated to them, but as their gleaning adventures became larger, a new solution was called for. They partnered with FOOD Share, which delivers empty bins to gleaning sites then retrieves them when full. They then help distribute the fresh food to 150 agencies, feeding close to 73,000 Ventura County residents monthly.

Bob and Ryan eventually moved on and parted ways with FFVC, but Martha is working on expanding to serve more Ventura area residents by building mission awareness and educating the public about gleaning.

“Since I was 11 years old, I’ve always worked in the community. It’s in my DNA.” She is looking forward to continued work with the Ojai Valley Green Coalition and creating a Food Forward chapter in the Ojai Valley.

“Eventually I’d like to have a Farmers’ Market Rescue/Recovery in the major towns of Ventura County. This young program has been
very successful with Food Forward Los Angeles in just the first three months of operation,” she says.

Martha also wants to collaborate with other food banks and nonprofits in surrounding areas, such as Santa Barbara County, where orchards and developments with citrus trees were used as a lifestyle selling point but often stand untouched. She is always on the lookout for properties offered up for picks. The venues have been as small as a back yard or several city blocks of renegade trees, but have also been as large as the orchard generously offered up by International Paper where over 6,500 pounds of Valencia oranges were harvested in just three hours.

Asked what she is most proud of, Martha replies, “Knowing that I’ve created the first sustainable Food Forward branch that’s firmly rooted in our county.” She should be proud. Since harvesting began in Ventura County, Food Forward has picked over 131,000 pounds of food. This roughly equates to just over 525,000 servings of fresh, nutritious food for the county’s hungry—food that would have otherwise gone to waste.

The next time you feel the warmth of the sun, see fruit in the trees or rolling around on the ground or see a fellow community member struggling to get by, think about reconnecting with nature, with community and helping create change. Gleaning is nutritious for the body, nutritious for the soul. Give Martha a call or sign up online to volunteer. She is always appreciative of more helping hands. Pay it forward. Pick it forward. Food Forward.

HOW CAN YOU GET INVOLVED

Visit FoodForward.org to find upcoming picks and events, to volunteer, become a Pick Leader or Property Scout.

There you will also find branded merchandise such as gloves and T-shirts for purchase, both very handy on a picking outing.

If you have an overabundance of fruits on your property and would like to donate the fruit, contact Food Forward Ventura County at 805-409-4760.

Jill Johnson is an artistic soul with an inquisitive mind and hearty appetite for life and food. You can find her musings on spilled milk and cookie crumblings on her blog: cookiesinheaven.blogspot.com