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Irrigated artichokes creep to the western edge of Castroville

ON THE PROWL IN "THISTLEVALE"

by NELSON VALJEAN

paintings by ROLLIN PICKFORD, JR.

EVER hear of a town built on a thistle? Castroville, California, one hundred miles south of San Francisco in the Salinas Valley, is just that. Here, the residents spend lifetimes raising and devouring thistles, and living and selling thistles—which, of course, artichokes are: glamorized thistles and mighty good eating, a mystery vegetable to some parts of the country.

Nearby Moss Landing may have developed other industrial interests for the area, but even there they don't kid about "nettle neighbors." Castroville artichokes are a \$3,000,000-a-year business, and no joking matter.

Is there any wonder that on driving from Salinas to Watsonville on a warm summer evening, when

you traverse both Castroville and Moss Landing on the Salinas-Castroville road and State Highway 1, you hear Italians out on their front porches playing accordions as they sing? Between refrains of *O Sole Mio* and *Torno Sorrento* they can hear the 'chokes abudding, for their olive-green, 'choke-laden "shrubs" spread even into their front yards, bushes that are often higher than your chest and frequently mistaken for pineapple plants.

Italians or people of Italian descent largely inhabit "Thistlevale"—incidentally, author John Steinbeck's backyard—a region that grows ninety per cent of the nation's produce of this type. The 500,000 boxes they shipped last year contained from sixty to seventy million 'chokes.

Yet not so many years ago the entire area was country nobody wanted. One of the first to explore the region fully was Lieutenant William Tecumseh Sherman, who later was the "General Sherman" of Civil War renown. He got lost in the yellowish maze of wild, pungent mustard that blanketed the land and "grew taller than a man on horseback." The desperate young lieutenant had to climb a willow tree to find his way out; then reported the cussed incident to Washington.

Juan Bautista Castro, for whom Castroville was named when he founded it in 1864, tried to sell lots at \$4.50 each, but despite his advertised claims of "plenty fresh air, plenty ventilation," he lured few buyers. In 1872, J. B. Cooper laid out lots which he offered free to anyone who would build on them. Again, few takers.

Even the crowd-pulling bear-and-bull fights, staged in arenas just off the town's rickety wooden sidewalks, failed to swell the permanent population. People would come; then go away.

Other temporary crowd-getters were the barges that plied the sloughs from Castroville to the ocean port of Moss Landing. Grain and wool growers from southern Monterey County, remaining overnight, were especially delighted with such facilities—and with the cooling fogs. When their dust-coated wagons, tinkling with bells, reached town, the drivers found that their loads had magically gained weight—due to absorption of moisture from the air. Only the buyers grumbled.

But the real pay-off finally came when Castroville became a railroad junction; for a time, the village boomed. Visitors came and often stayed.

One caller the old-timers remember was a gangling youngster who used to trudge over from his home in Salinas, nine miles away, to prowl the countryside. Little did they dream, however, that the active boy, always full of pranks, was forming impressions which he would later immortalize in many books on Salinas Valley under his name of John Steinbeck.

Castroville tried raising wheat, beets and other produce, but it was left to Alfred Tottino to decide upon artichokes. Familiar with the cardoon, an ancient thistly vegetable with spiny leaf stalks and roots grown in Italy as early as the fifteenth century, Tottino sent to Italy for seed. For a time he grew artichokes in San Francisco; then moved southward, ever southward. At Half Moon Bay they did well, and it was from Half Moon Bay that another grower, John De Benedetti, made the very first artichoke shipment to New York in 1916. Still, Tottino kept moving south. He grew his 'chokes for a while in Santa Cruz.

When he reached Castroville, it was love at first sight. He correctly guessed the soil was right for his strange vegetable and the climate perfect—misty



"'Chokes abudding" near Highway 1

and muggy, yet moderate; no freeze, no burn.

In no other place on earth have 'chokes done so well, which is why Castroville labels itself "The Artichoke Center of the World." Some of Tottino's original mat-like roots are still growing; old artichoke growers say they never die.

'Chokes, of course were soon growing, too, in neighboring Moss Landing, then a sleepy lagoon region that had lost some of its trade and prestige to the railroad. But what it had forsaken in commerce, it was making up in other ways, not always too savory. While unforeseen by Captain Charles Moss of Ecuador, who had built a wharf there years before, giving the Landing its name, there developed a business of smuggling Chinese and opium into the territory. Paul Parker, Salinas newspaper publisher, became a bit too nosy one night and investigated a mysterious, visiting ship. He barely skipped with his life.

Later, during prohibition times, coves at Moss

The storied Moss Landing Harbor





Sea water magnesium plant

Landing were popular with rum-runners. Once, in 1926, there was a tip-off. Officers were awaiting a liquor-laden boat. Revolvers, shotguns and machine guns blazed. When the smoke cleared, one man was dead and three injured, a subject for national headlines. Subsequently, the bodies of a man and woman were found floating in Moss Landing slough, but to this day nobody has told whether they were the tipsters or were otherwise involved.

Today, the old Moss Landing whalery—a barn-like structure used for rendering of whales caught nearby—is gone and in its place are fleets of fishing and pleasure boats, with a salt works not far beyond. Other changes are under way, what with oil explorations and the operation of a multi-million-dollar sea water magnesium plant and an \$80,000,000 electric generating plant erected by the Pacific Gas & Electric Company on a former 271-acre vegetable patch, a 771,000-horsepower Hercules

The highway through Castroville



producing one of the two biggest packages of steam-electric power west of the Mississippi River—575,000 kilowatts.

Here, in this awesome powerhouse, visitors can scarcely believe what they see. The main turbine room, for instance, is two and a half times longer than a football field. The eight massive boilers tower as high as an eight-story building. An eighteen-inch submarine pipeline runs approximately 3,000 feet off shore in Moss Landing harbor to a specially built mooring for fuel-oil delivery by tankers. A "closed circuit TV," one of the nation's first installations of its kind, enables the powerhouse operators to look inside the Hades of the boiler furnaces from a control room in another part of the building.

Truly, if ever there were a harnessed giant, a tremendous push-button genie, this is it. While visitors cannot inspect the giant's workings on a casual, drop-in basis (because of security), conducted tours for groups may be arranged by getting in touch with the P. G. & E. at Salinas, Monterey or San Francisco.

Despite Moss Landing's change in complexion with industrial progress, the country life goes on, there and in Castroville, bountifully, placidly, happily. Virtually in the shadows of powerhouse stacks that soar 225 feet among circling gulls, squatting old homes still rear their weathered walls, with artichokes thriving alongside. *O Sole Mio!* ■

Cooking the 'Mystery' Vegetable

ONE of the biggest rewards of growing artichokes is in having them to eat, for they pack twenty-nine percent iron, plus other goodies for the body. Taste good, too.

The simplest method of preparing them is to boil them; serve hot or cold. Mary, the writer's wife, first trims the top, removes the tips. She strips off the outer layer of coarse leaves, trims the stem short, plunges the 'chokes in boiling water, adds a little salt, pepper, butter, lemon and a clove of garlic; then cooks them from thirty to forty-five minutes, less if they are young.

To eat boiled artichokes, pick off a leaf at a time, dip in mayonnaise or desired dressing. Skim off the meaty part with your teeth; the part near the base, chew, swallow. Relish particularly the part wedged to the base, or heart. When you get to the heart, that's it! Use your fork now, if you want, but sidetrack the heart's thistly, button-like center.

For more elaboration, follow a recipe by Mrs. Antone Leonardini, whose husband grows—and eats—artichokes by the thousands.

Mrs. Leonardini puts several cupfuls of quartered, small-sized 'chokes into a heavy skillet, adds olive oil or bacon drippings, salt and pepper, chopped parsley and a little garlic. Then she lets them simmer twenty-five or thirty minutes, now and then adding ¼-glass water, a little at a time, as needed. Between times, the skillet should wear a tight lid.

Crisp fried artichokes are delicious, as are baked stuffed artichokes and artichoke casserole. Recipes for these and other artichoke dishes may be obtained from the Central California Artichoke Growers Association, Box 1000, Castroville, California.



View towards Longfellows Wharf, St. Michaels, Maryland

Fishing Village in a Bottle

by STEWART STERLING

paintings by JACK LEWIS

THE STEAMBOATS and diesel ferries which used to connect the Eastern Shore of Maryland with the outside world are now museum pieces; the nearest railroad is fifty miles distant. Unless you go by yacht or helicopter, there is no way to reach the salty village of Tilghmans save by car.

The land approach is U. S. 50 from the new Chesapeake Bay Bridge, by way of the colonial courthouse town of Easton, through historic St. Michaels, a flatland of well-groomed estates where the station wagons bear such names as *Rich Neck*

Manor, Hidden Harbor, Deepwater Point. Then the stately avenues of poplars and the formal hedges of glossy box begin to be replaced by pine groves with an occasional clump of holly, finally cornfields and broiler houses. The road now is banked with honeysuckle, gilded with trumpet vine, edged with Queen Anne's lace. To get to the island-village of Tilghmans you cross a lift bridge which has a portcullis of scarlet and pink hollyhocks.

We watched a yawl driving down Knapp's Narrows toward that bridge one afternoon when a Bay