

# Local Berries Return to LaSalle



The Windsor Star: Dax Melmer

*Brad Raymont, owner of Raymont's Berries in Cottam, is providing the strawberries for this year's Strawberry Festival in LaSalle. It's the first time in 23 years that the festival has used locally produced berries.*

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**COTTAM** The LaSalle Strawberry festival will have all local strawberries for the first time in more than two decades.

The festival, which runs May 31 to June 3, is celebrating its 25th year. Although the festival started as an early promotion for local berries, it had local strawberries only in its second year of operation.

"I know they told me over the winter that's the biggest knock that they get, that they don't have local strawberries," Brad Raymont, of Raymont's Berries near Cottam, said Monday. "I think everyone's pretty excited about the prospect."

Raymont can supply enough berries for the festival because he rows his everbearing strawberries on raised beds covered with plastic. He already has strawberries for sale at his stand and can still have berries until thanksgiving. The festival was early for most strawberry growers and they ran into the problem of not having enough for their own customers if they sold berries to the festival. Then there was weather and timing. So, for decades, it's been California berries.

Not this year. "A lot of people are really excited," festival chairman John gray said Monday.

Last year Raymont provided local strawberries for the strawberry-eat-

ing contest only and worked out the details with organizers this winter on selling his berries to supply the whole festival.

Local berries are more expensive, but the festival can afford them thanks to a construction workers' union that agreed to pay about \$2,000, the difference between imported and local berries. Gray said the donation came from LIUNA, the laborers' International Union of North America.

The strawberry festival, celebrating its 25th anniversary, could have been a radish festival - early organizer considered the radish as the focus, Gray said. But there weren't a lot of things to go with radishes.

"You can't eat radishes and ice cream," Gray said.

Besides the local berries the festival has two other new draws.

To go along with the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, there will be a period encampment with a cannon by the water.

And there will be a wine garden sponsored by Sprucewood Shores Estate Winery that will allow visitors to buy glasses of wine.

The popular festival at Gil Maure Park will start May 31. On June 1 the



Kids enjoy a ride on the dragon Wagon at last year's LaSalle Strawberry Festival. The festival, which kicks off on may 31, is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

festival will hold its opening ceremonies and have fireworks. Saturday, June 2, features the parade at 10 a.m. The festival wraps up June 3 with a fishing derby, a baby contest and a strawberry eating contest. There is entertainment throughout the weekend. Raymont has never had so much work and sleepless nights to save his berry crop.

It got warm early and then freezing temperatures hit. He had to irrigate his fields 10 times to protect them from frost or freeze.

While it seems strange to let ice form around plants, it saves them by keeping them at 32 F, he said. He would start losing blossoms at 31 degrees.

For some of the earlier cold nights, he protected the plants with blankets. There were a lot of nights that it was just so cold you had to be up checking constantly to make sure there wasn't going to be a frost or a freeze."

Most local strawberries are usually ready in Junes but he was selling his strawberries this weekend at \$4.50 per quart.

Raymont's Berries is at 445E County Road 14, northeast of Cottam off County Road 27.