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Local artist paints, cooks and then eats his models

**By Paul Phillips**From page A1 | July 25, 2013 | [Leave Comment](#)

Biblical and historical scenes have been canvas fodder since the dawn of time, but local artist and UC Davis professor Bob Sommer has found a different subject for his paintings: vegetables. Sommer paints a diverse array of veggies from greens to peppers, and will be displaying his work at a reception on Friday, Aug. 9.

Sommer is also an avid cook, describing himself as an artist who cooks and eats his models, and he has written a book of recipes involving greens that he will bring to the reception.

A long-time mushroom painter, Sommer began painting peppers in the early 1970s. Today, he considers his specialty to be the Capsicum genus of pepper, but he has also expanded his portfolio to include paintings of eggplants and, within the last few years, paintings of greens.

He added that he paints many plant varieties that are unknown to people, such as colored eggplants. Examples include Thai eggplants, which are green or orange; Turkish eggplants, which are red; and white eggplants, which are known by names such as Casper or the Easter Eggplant.

For Sommer, the artistic process begins at farmers markets. The vegetables shown in Sommer's paintings were all purchased at various markets. Sommer shops frequently at the Davis Farmers Market, and he added that he and his wife, Barbara Sommer, always make sure to visit public markets whenever they travel. Once they are at the markets, the search for models begins.

"I look for species and varieties that I haven't painted before, and I especially like things that are going to look pretty," Sommer said.

Once he has obtained his desired model, Sommer returns to his house to paint it. If he and his wife obtain a model while traveling, they return to their hotel — they make sure to stay in hotels with good natural light.

"Natural light is kind of essential," he added. "If you use artificial light, you paint weird colors that aren't there."

Sommer prefers to paint with watercolor, explaining that it is “incredibly economical, portable, and, for me, emotionally satisfying.” Although he used to do all of his artwork on 8 inch-by-10 inch pads, he now uses heavier-grade paper and matches the size of the sketch and the size of the paper to the size of the model.

Furthermore, Sommer paints both interior and exterior views of his models. Although he used to feel squeamish about cutting them up, his wife soon convinced him that painting the insides of vegetables would be more interesting.

Sommer first began painting vegetables other than mushrooms in the summer of 1973 at the suggestion of Dorothy Coyle, then a grower at the Davis Farmers Market.

“She gave me a pepper that was really beautiful and suggested that I paint it because there were no mushrooms around,” Sommer said, explaining that mushrooms are hard to come by during the summer.

Sommer noted that another influence on his work was his job. Sommer has been at UCD since 1963, and he was the first director of the Center for Consumer Research at the UCD College of Food and Agriculture. As this position had him doing research on farmers’ markets, it gave him access to a large variety of vegetables to sketch.

The Aug. 9 reception featuring Sommer’s work will run from 6 to 8 p.m. at the International House, Davis, 10 College Park. Exhibit hours for the Community Room are 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Monday through Friday in August and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday in September and October.



Red bore kale by Bob Sommers. Courtesy photo



Copenhagen cabbage by Bob Sommers. Courtesy photo



Belgian endive by Bob Sommers. Courtesy photo



Beaver Dam pepper by Bob Sommers. Courtesy photo