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Deneb Williams, executive chef at The Firehouse restaurant in Old Sacramento, realized a long time ago that cucumbers aren't just for making afternoon sandwiches and putting over tired eyes.

Because of their versatility, Williams likes to use cucumbers both as a palate-cleanser and as a substantial part of many of his signature dishes.

And California's cucumber season is now in full swing.

"I grew up in Seattle with a garden full of vegetables, yet the weather meant that the window for the vegetables at their best was just the month of August," Williams said.

"Here, it can extend from June to mid-October, which means we are able to source from local farmers," he added. "Often the vegetables are still warm from the sun when we get them."

Cucumber is vital to his Dungeness crab salad and Wagyu beef tataki, he said, with the cucumber acting as a "balance" for the other ingredients.

And after noticing lemon cucumber showing up more and more at farmers markets, he's putting the spherical yellow vegetable to good use.

"I make a lemon cucumber gazpacho, a small, cold cucumber and tomato soup served to start in an espresso cup," Williams said.

"It's perfect for summer, and this is the time of year to buy them locally."

He usually buys his in Sloughhouse, east of Sacramento.

In fact, The Firehouse makes it a policy to buy most of its produce from California growers. Williams' favorite is Watanabe Farms, based in Sacramento.

"They honestly grow the best vegetables in Sacramento County," he said. "I love using their tomatoes and squashes.

"There's a rapport I've built up with them over a period of time because I trust their produce."

Williams prefers to use the milder English cucumber in his recipes because of its versatility.

"Though it is nice to cook with the lemon cucumber," he added. "It tastes almost fruity."

He also notes that cucumbers can vary, based on air temperatures while they're growing.

"When the weather gets really hot, people report a faint, fragrant taste, sometimes slightly bitter," Williams said.

Cucumbers contain compounds called cucurbitacins. Their levels rise when the plant is under stress, and cucumbers aren't fond of heat.

"Not many people realize their tastes differ with weather and with the type of cucumber you're cooking with," Williams said.

The chef knows his cucumbers, but he claims it takes a lot of research to be a cucumber expert.

Could he list the different types?

He laughed. "Oh, my goodness, there are so many kinds. Where do I begin?"