Savoring Food Traditions and Creating New Ones

David Cavagnaro and the Pepperfield Project

Thanks to my Italian grandmother, I grew up appreciating food traditions without realizing that's what they were. Every Christmas, for instance, I anticipated with mouth-watering joy the smell of her kitchen – the lingering background aroma of garlic simmering in olive oil; basil and rosemary-infused ravioli sauce made the day before so that all the flavors would blend; a juicy duck roasting in the oven while she rolled out the huge sheet of ravioli dough on the kitchen table. I still have that yard-long wooden rolling pin and her century-old ravioli roller, yet to properly replicate, try as I might, those delicate postage-stamp ravioli that were her special trademark.

Long after those childhood years, in the process of renewing seed on some 15,000 varieties in the SSE collection at Heritage Farm, I became acutely aware of the diverse heritage of our food, thanks to thousands of years of selection by countless gardeners and farmers throughout the world. Even then, I did not fully appreciate what now seems obvious: that the creation and preservation of genetic diversity is directly the result of place-based food traditions. In other words, people grew and saved those favorite local varieties because they belonged in the favorite foods they cooked, generation after generation.

The person to thank for rendering this fact obvious to me is Gary Nabhan, prolific author, co-founder of Native Seeds/SEARCH, former board member and long-standing friend of the Seed Savers Exchange, champion of both genetic and cultural diversity. His book, *Renewing America's Food Traditions*, bears a subtitle, *Saving and Savoring the Continent's Most Endangered Foods*, which clearly suggests that saving endangered varieties of fruits, vegetables, and livestock is intrinsically linked to saving the food traditions that utilize them.

To help advance this important notion, by linking food and history, the Pepperfield Project collaborated with the Seed Savers Exchange to create educational theme dinners last summer featuring some of these endangered heirloom varieties. The several-course meals, served to SSE and community members at Decorah's Pepperfield Farm, were created by our resident chefs, Lee Chapman and Allison Lukes, from produce grown on the farm with few exceptions, and almost all from seeds I have saved myself.

Return to the 1800s dinner

The first dinner, held in September on the evening of SSE's Squash Festival, was centered around the history of Pepperfield's restored 1851 pioneer log cabin in which Reverend Ulrik Vilhelm Koren, an eventual founder of Luther College, gave a famous sermon on Christmas Eve, 1853, which founded the first Lutheran congregation in the area. Having researched what vegetables those mostly Norwegian settlers would have found available from regional seed companies in the mid to late 1800s, I chose a total of 20 varieties still available commercially today. Every one of these items on the menu for the 1800s dinner came from our gardens or the land:

Stowell's Evergreen and Golden Bantam sweet corn
Early Summer Crookneck squash
Connecticut Field pumpkin
Green Hubbard winter squash
Boston Pickling cucumber
Burpee's Stringless Greenpod snap beans
Black Valentine beans, snap and dry
Early Mohawk dry beans
Early Flat Dutch and Jersey Wakefield cabbage
Black Seeded Simpson and Parris Island Cos lettuce
Red Cherry and Yellow Pear tomatoes
Nantes and Danvers carrots
Champion of England, Telephone, and Thomas Laxton peas

In addition, we incorporated some native wild foods early settlers would likely have used as well: black walnuts, wild grapes, ostrich fern fiddleheads, maple syrup, and another syrup made with elderberries and aronia berries. The main course just begged to be filleted tenderloin of venison! All ingredients in their fresh harvested state were displayed (well, except for the deer, represented by a lovely six-point buck skull), and an informative handout passed to all the guests giving the history of each variety.

The starter table included a platter of fresh tomatoes, carrot slices, and baby lettuces to be munched with a Black Valentine bean dip; Boston cucumber, Black Valentine snap bean, and Ostrich Fern fiddlehead pickles; and triangles of home-made bread topped with a spread made from peas blended with goat milk feta.

The second course was a bowl of Early Mohawk beans and Green Hubbard squash cooked with maple syrup and molasses, served with corn bread laced with Golden Bantam kernels and corn fritters featuring Stowell's Evergreen. A coleslaw salad followed, including both cabbage varieties, fresh apples and pears and dressed with a wild grape vinaigrette.

The main course placed butterflies of venison tenderloin on top of mashed crookneck squash cooked down southern-style with goat milk from the farm, dressed with sauce made from the elderberry-aronia berry syrup and carmelized shallots. Sides of braised Burpee's Stringless Greenpod beans and maple syrup glazed carrots added a bright splash of color.

For desert, Allison baked a too-beautiful-to-cut Danish Braid stuffed with a pumpkin-pie-like filling made from the Connecticut Fields and topped with native black walnut crumbles – but we cut and served it anyway! Judging from the clean plates, no one left the farm hungry.

One of the main educational points of "returning to the 1800s" was to illustrate how some of the food crops we take for granted today have been changed through breeding and selection since Reverend Koren preached to those early settlers 160 years ago. There was yet no yellow sweet corn, for instance; Stowell's Evergreen and later varieties like Country Gentleman (introduced in 1890) were all white. Sweet corn as we know it is, in fact, a real newcomer in the ancient history of this New World crop, first appearing among the Iroquois in the 1700s. Golden Bantam didn't come along until 1902. Some of us (like skinny me who was called one as a kid!) are old enough to remember when snap beans were always called "string beans" because the strong vein on the placental side of the pod had to be removed before cooking. The first stringless snap bean was developed from the yellow Refugee Wax in the 1880s by Calvin Keeney, known as "Father of the Stringless Bean," who sold the rights to his first stringless green bean to Burpee which released Burpee's Stringless Greenpod in 1894. Other varieties such as Early Summer Crookneck and Connecticut Field pumpkin remain to this day little changed from the Native American crops originally given to early Pilgrim settlers.

Renewing America's Food Traditions Dinner

The second dinner we planned the summer garden around, held in mid-November, was based upon Gary's *Renewing America's Food Traditions* book. Since I had illustrated much of the book, I had already grown and photographed many of the varieties described in it, so these seeds were pulled from Pepperfield's collection and grown again. In the end, we based the meal upon 25 varieties representing all of the "Food Nations" from which Gary described endangered food traditions. Once again, all varieties were displayed as harvested, the most unique being plants of Mexican Chapalote, reputed to be the oldest known North American corn variety, arriving in the Southwest some 4100 years ago, topping out at 15 feet, next to the earliest and shortest of all corns, three-foot-tall plants of Gaspe Flint corn

selected by the Iroquois, Micmac and other tribes of the St. Lawrence River watershed. On the display table was also a bouquet of feathers representing the main course, three tom Rhode Island Narragansett turkeys obtained as chicks from Glenn Drown's Sand Hill Preservation Center, raised at Heritage Farm as part of SSE's rare breed poultry exhibit, and butchered the day before in order to marinate them overnight in herb-laced brine. Each place setting was gifted with a colorful Narragansett feather and a printed history of every variety.

A few varieties we were either unable to locate or grow in Iowa. The specific place-based varieties of pomegranate, quince, and cranberries listed in the book were represented by more common types. Nevada Single-leaf Pinyon Pine, nuts of which were normally hand harvested by Paiutes but now suffering from climate change die-off, had to be replaced with seeds imported from China and Korea, further illustrating the precariousness of local food traditions.

A real success story, by contrast, was represented by the revival from near extinction of the Mission olive, brought originally to Baja California Mission San Francisco Xavier by Padre Juan de Ugarte in 1699. SSE member Laura Fletcher, attending a weekend seed-saving workshop at Heritage Farm, located and personally delivered both preserved olives and hand-crafted Mission olive oil from the Temecula Olive Oil Company near her home in San Diego County, a family-owned operation devoted to rescuing and reviving rare varieties. Besides using the delicate oil throughout the meal's preparation and serving the olives as hors d'oeuvres, for a dip to accompany Allison's whole wheat and oat buttermilk crackers, I blended Mission olives and olive oil with ground meal of Hopi Red dye amaranth, Hidatsa sunflower seeds, and pine nuts.

Of the twelve separate dishes included in the dinner, it would be difficult to extract a favorite, but fair consensus settled on another item on the hors d'oeuvres table – squares of an incredibly savory fried polenta Lee made from the Chapalote corn topped with basil pesto, sun-dried tomatoes, and a dollop of goat cheese lightly baked in the oven. Since none of the 27 guests had eaten quince, another hit among the starters was spiced poached quince sautéed in butter and honey, surrounded by some of the aromatic fruits picked only days before by my son in Sacramento. From the same California garden he sent pomegranates whose colorful seeds decorated the salad course, finely chopped cabbage and Jack's Copperclad Jerusalem artichokes, with roasted pine nuts and a cranberry dressing.

For the next course, Lee adapted the traditional southern recipe for Hoppin' John featured in the RAFT book, combining brown rice with Clay field peas, onion, garlic, garnished with a few colorful flakes of spicy Louisiana Fish peppers fresh-picked from a potted plant on the display table, and served with fried corn meal breaded Choppee okra.

For a soup based on Native American "three sisters" corn, bean, and squash cultivation, I followed Gary's reporting of the traditional way for making hominy

by cooking both Yellow Hickory King and Osage Red flint corn in wood ashes, which Lee combined with Arikara Yellow beans, Sibley winter squash, and Ozette potatoes treasured for over two centuries by the Makah people of Neah Bay, Washington, with a little added heat from more Fish peppers.

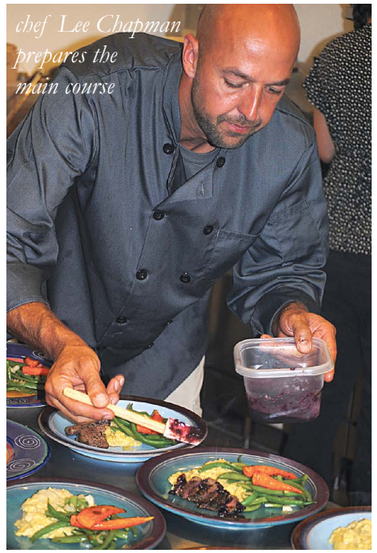
Lee baked the three Narragansett toms on a bed of fresh garden celery, carrots, and herbs to flavor the drippings. He invented a dressing made from wild rice hand-harvested and parched from Minnesota's northern lakes by Pepperfield's 2012 intern, Klaus Zimmerman, dried morel mushrooms from the farm, leeks, and American Chestnuts just harvested by our Minnesota friends at Badgersett who are part of the breeding effort to create a blight-resistant version of this American icon. Slices of juicy turkey breast were served on a bed of Ozette mashed potatoes and the dressing, all coated with rich gravy made from the herb-laced drippings. On the main course plate we also included another item adapted from a recipe in the book – maple syrup glazed Southern Queen sweet potatoes and Sibley squash flavored with Meyer lemons fresh picked from a potted tree laden with ripe fruit right in the living room where the dinner was served. Fresh Brussels sprouts from the garden added color to the plate.

Allison once again baked the dessert, a Streusel featuring another place-based variety, Boston Marrow winter squash. I totally stumped everyone with a contest to see who could identify the slice of brilliant magenta fruit added to each dessert plate. Another box had serendipitously arrived that very day from my son in California which this time contained some ripe fruits of prickly pear cactus. No one came even close to the answer, but neither did anyone hesitate to try cactus pears for the first time.

While we tried in the RAFT dinner to more or less follow a few recipes linked to local food traditions, perhaps we started a new food tradition, one in the spirit of the Seed Savers Exchange itself, based upon rare foods from everywhere, brought by immigrants preserving their own traditions from their homelands the world over, as well as foods cherished by Native Americans who preceded them. To further this idea, Pepperfield is planning an extended series of educational theme dinners in collaboration with SSE for the 2014 season. Some may celebrate ethnic immigrant traditions such as Mexican, Vietnamese, and the southern Mediterranean cultures of Italy and Greece by highlighting their varieties. Others may revolve around a seasonal theme, such as vegetables that can be stored or preserved for winter. Varieties included in each meal will also be featured in the display garden at Heritage Farm, and we hope some will be sourced from listed members in the seed exchange and grown by local members as well.

The 2014 dinner schedule is included on page 27.

squash and walnut Dutch braid



chef Lee Chapman prepares the main course

three sisters course of squash, beans, and cornbread

Fresh Herb and Goat Cheese Stuffed Sweet Peppers

In this case, we used a popular Seed Savers Exchange variety from Hungary, Feherozon, but any sweet ripe bell, cheese, or pimento-shaped variety would do. For added brilliance, use ripe or unripe peppers of other available colors, adding green, yellow, red, brown, and purple.

Serves six

Ingredients:

- 3 medium sweet ripe peppers
- 14 oz. organic fresh goat cheese
- ¼ cup cream, if needed
- ½ cup packed parsley, chopped
- ¼ cup packed Italian Genovese basil, torn
- 2 tablespoons oregano, chopped
- 2 tablespoons chives, chopped
- 2 medium shallots, minced
- 1 tablespoon lemon zest
- Juice from half a lemon
- Olive oil
- Sea salt
- Black pepper

Directions:

1. Preheat oven at 350.
2. Halve the peppers lengthwise and remove seeds/membrane. Rub peppers with oil, salt and pepper. Set aside.
3. In a food processor, combine the cheese, herbs, shallots, lemon zest and half the lemon juice. Process until smooth, (if needed, slowly add cream to start processing). Season to taste with salt, pepper and remaining lemon juice if needed. Mix until incorporated.
4. Fill peppers with goat cheese mixture. Place stuffed peppers in glass baking dish, add water to bottom of pan and cover with foil.
5. Bake for 15 to 18 minutes. Remove foil. Peppers should remain firm.
6. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Upcoming SSE/Pepperfield Dinners in 2014

This fall, Seed Savers Exchange and Pepperfield will be hosting four theme dinners out at Pepperfield Farm. Each dinner will feature locally grown produce and educational programming.

Please join us for some good, homegrown, heritage food flavored with a real taste of history. Contact Pepperfield for meal and registration information: (563) 382-8833 or visit http://pepperfieldproject.org/

August 30 - Italian

(after our Tomato Tasting event)

September 13 - Vietnamese

September 27 - Mexican

(after our Fall Harvest School)

October 11 - German