

The Oak Hill Farmer

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Hope is the Thing

Geography of Hope Conference searches for balance in a tipsy world

By Jonah Raskin

Beginning in 1492, wild North America seemed a place of hope to Europeans. They called it "The New World" as apart from the Old World. Though it was patently false - the two continents were the same age geologically - the phrase "The New World" caught on. For hundreds of years it was probably the most effective advertising copy, ever. It brought millions of hard-working paupers, peasants, religious heretics, and indentured servants to the shores of the original 13 colonies. Now, 500+ years after Europeans first landed, much of America has become a wasteland, where no living thing can grow and it can drive almost anyone to despair. The same grim story, however, begs us all to be hopeful. Grandfathers and great-grandfathers tell us that hope came alive in the darkest days of the 1930s Depression. It's also coming alive again now in the current meltdown of the economy.

I thought about hope and about despair, too, at the Geography of Hope Conference in Point Reyes Station, which I attended on the next-to-the-last weekend in March 2009. Every panelist talked about the long, uninterrupted beating that the environment has taken and is still taking. Everyone might have gone home hopeless. "Almost all of the land that the Indians knew is destroyed," Greg Sarris, the Chairman of the Coast Miwok Tribe, said. "We've become foreigners in our own land." Wes Jackson, the founder and Director of the Land Institute, an environmental group in Kansas, added, "We are not native to North America. We're here as colonists." Wendy Johnson, a gardener at Green Gulch in Marin and the author of *Gardening at the Dragon's Gate: At Work in the Wild and Cultivated World*, said, "This is a dragon time. The world is on fire." But she didn't leave it at that, nor did anyone else. "We need gardens," she said. Wes Jackson added, "There is the possibility of becoming native. The journey has begun." And Greg Sarris said, "We have to grow together for a sustainable future."

In fact, it felt as though the future had begun then and there at the Geography of Hope Conference, which took place, not at an exclusive resort, but in the gymnasium of



Transplanting continues. Cabbage, broccoli, leeks, onions and cauliflower.

West Marin School, a down-to-earth building on Highway One. The official fee was \$200; I opted out of the banquets and paid \$50. I met young college students from back East, who were attending the conference on scholarships, and refugees from the East Coast, too, who'd left there in 1967. Philip Fradkin, who lives in West Marin, and who has

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STAFF PROFILE

Seth Dolinsky

Seth Dolinsky describes himself as an Farmers “Marketeer”. “I’m like the middleman in the cycle from the dirt to your stomach.”

And as the middleman, Seth knows both sides. For years he worked for the Sonoma Community Garden, doing the hard work; digging ditches and installing irrigation. He’s had a hand in growing his own food since before he can remember and is ready with advise concerning what needs to be done in the garden.

Seth has been working for Oak Hill since 2002 at the farmers’ market. Which is quite a commitment considering the job is just a few hours a

week, year round. He does it because he believes it’s important to feed people good food. Seth is impressed by “all the great product farmer Paul and the crew are pumping out of the amazing valley soils”. The farmers’ market wouldn’t be the same without Seth’s strong back and healthy knowledge of what happens on the farm.

And he cooks! Seth favors preparations that are quick and practical. “Throw together this with that, add a little sesame oil and it’s great!” His favorite vegetable is the corno di toro red sweet pepper, available from July into the late fall. The corno can find its way into almost any summer dish.

Besides working, Seth is committed to being physically active; play-



ing, running, swimming, hiking, biking, skateboarding and surfing. Sometimes he’ll slow down enough to construct some pottery, listen to music or think about who we are and where we’re going. He rarely leaves the market without a bouquet for his girlfriend Anna, a very lucky girl. ✍️

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 written about Wallace Stegner, pointed out that the geography of Northern California has often been dark and destructive. He mentioned fires, earthquakes, and serial killers loose in the hills of Marin, spreading fear to hikers, backpackers, natives, and tourists alike. It was Stegner, of course, who coined the phrase “geography of hope.” As a student and scholar of western geography, he knew the land could inspire hope as well as despair.

Wes Jackson interjected a note of welcome humor. He was from Kansas, he said. He’d grown up as a Methodist, and Buddhists in the audience probably wouldn’t understand the tenants of his religion. “I don’t really have many spiritual allies in Kansas,” he added. “It’s not Marin County.” We all laughed. Then, he caught us up sharply. “There are dead zones around the country,” he said. “So many chemicals have been added to the soil that nothing grows there anymore.”

The conference began with art and ritual that cut across generations. Mas Masumoto, the fabled Japanese-American organic peach farmer from Del Ray, California, performed a poem about farming. His daughter Nikiko played the tradition Japanese drum, the Taiko, moving her whole body to the rhythm of the drumbeat. Father and daughter balanced one another, and indeed balance was a keynote of the whole conference. “Our problem is how to recognize our ignorance and still keep the faith,” Jackson said. “We have to be mindful that we are more ignorant than knowledgeable. We have to remember, too, that we don’t know how it is all going to turn out, and that we have to be adaptable, and use whatever is available to us.”

Many of the panelists were writers; some were also

farmers. Verlyn Klinkenborg lives in Upstate New York, writes for The New York Times and also teaches writing at a college in California. As a writing teacher myself at Sonoma State University, I listened closely to everything he said. About 25 of us had lunch – sandwiches, and salads provided by the Cowgirl Creamery – with Klinkenborg, a bearded, feisty, unsentimental fellow, and a craftsman with words. “The shape and the velocity of the sentence is the only thing that matters,” he said. Perhaps his most provocative remark was, “I don’t believe in style,” though he followed that with, “Being a writer means making millions of sentences and killing off most of them.”

On the way home I remembered my last visit with Bob Cannard, senior at his barn in Sonoma. I thought that Bob, senior, would have enjoyed the conference: the fellowship, the food and the conversations about language, land, and seeds, especially when one panelist told the audience that more seeds have been sold this year than in any other previous year. That news seemed to give everyone a real sense of hope. A seed is indeed a cause for renewal.

Bob Cannard, I remembered as I drove home in the rain, was one of the most hopeful human beings I had ever met. “The most important thing this country could do now would be to persuade people to buy locally, and not from corporations controlled by the conglomerates,” he told me. “That would change the world. We can do it. It will be a peaceful revolution, too.” As I arrived at the front door of my house in Santa Rosa, I remembered one of the last things Bob, senior told me: “If I’m a link to the past, my son Bobby is surely a link to the future.” That connection to and faith in the future kept Bob Cannard, senior going for more than 80 years. Maybe it will help keep the rest of us going, too. ✍️

VEGETABLE OF THE MONTH:

FAVA BEANS *Vicia faba*

Nothing says spring like the arrival of favas. Planted in the fall, these beans have a double role on the farm. First they work in the field. They capture nitrogen in their little root-nodules, then after they are chopped up and tilled in, their bound up carbon is slowly released into the soil creating a more fertile bed for whatever is planted next. Favas are often planted as a “cover crop” because of their excellent soil-building qualities.

But that’s not all. Favas are a delicious, if short-seasoned and labor-intensive, vegetable. Buy the pods that feel fat as the beans inside will be large. To prepare, snap the pods open where you feel each bean and squeeze them out. Put the beans in boiling water and bring the water back to a boil. Strain beans. Pinch a bit of the white outer skin, then squeeze out the inner, brilliant green bean. At this point, they are ready to eat or use in a recipe. One pound of beans yields about ½ cup of beans. If you have the right guests, shelling favas can be part of the party!

The nutrition in a cup of fava beans is impressive with carbohydrate at 33g (grams), protein at 12.9, fiber at 9.2g and low fat at under 1g. The fava bean is also a good source of many vitamins and minerals. By adding sesame seeds to your favorite fava bean recipe your meal will contain all the essential amino acids. Fava beans with Oak Hill’s salad mix is a nutritionally complete and very healthy meal.

The fava bean is one of the most ancient plants in cultivation with an estimated entry into the Mediterranean diet about 600 BC. Curiously, many Mediterranean

**NUTRITION
SCIENCE
CORNER**
BY KEN NEIHOFF

FROM THE FIELDS

On the produce side: On April 14th the first of 8-9 crops of corn and green beans were planted. The crew continues to transplant onions, celery, radicchio, and eggplant and leeks. April 21st planted main season (storage) onions, cucumbers and the first melons. First crop of heirloom tomatoes went into the field April 24th. All the peppers are still in the greenhouse and should be planted the first week of May.

Again, we are harvesting our popular Hong Vit “peas” or pods.

Tarragon, Easter egg radishes, fava beans and a beautiful red stem dandelion are all new this month. The Italian dandelion is a new crop as well. The first bunches of new small carrots are finally ready for the beginning of May. Green garlic is sizing up and will probably be too big to be sold “green” by the end of the month. Raspberries are just beginning to set flowers.

And for our late-season tomatoes, we are starting another group of seedlings to be transplanted toward the end of June and into July.

Paul planted an insectary blend from Le Ballisters a year ago in two very different areas. It’s been fun watching them evolve. One spot is thick with California poppies and red clover right now. The other place is dominated with flowering cilantro. Having borders of flowers creates a habitat rich with beneficial insect species.

On the flower side: Chuy continues to harvest, weed and plant his standard grouping. We’ll see sunflowers soon. Zinnias, marigolds, asters, amaranth and various grasses are all coming along.

Fava Bean and Spring Onion Soup

Serves 4

4 lb. unshelled fava beans 1 qt. clear vegetable stock
4 md. Spring onions Salt and white pepper
2 oz. unsalted butter 1 sprig fresh savory

Shell the fava beans and blanch in rapidly boiling salted water for 30 seconds after they re-gain the boil. Shock them in an ice water bath until completely chilled and drain. Peel the favas and reserve.

Clean the spring onions, removing the root end and the very tops of the greens. Slice the whole onion, white and green, equally. In a medium hot saucepan, slowly sauté the onions with the butter, stirring occasionally to prevent browning. Adjust the pan temperature if necessary. Cook until the onions are completely soft, about 15 minutes.

Add the stock and season with salt and white pepper. Bring to a boil and add the fava beans. When the stock reaches a boil again, quickly remove from the heat and begin pureeing the soup in a blender. Season as necessary, garnish with the picked savory and serve. If the soup will be served later, pour the soup into a container that has been positioned in an ice water bath to cool as quickly as possible to preserve the color.

Recipe thanks to Chris Jones, executive chef at the girl and the fig

people were allergic to fava beans or inhaling fava pollen, but were able to fend off malaria, a prolific disease at the time. Those of Mediterranean decent may still have trouble with fava beans. Gene-food interactions are an interesting area of research and soon scientists will be able to analyze genomes and prescribe a diet that is optimal for one’s unique biochemistry. For a more in depth look at this topic pick up the book, “Why Some Like It Hot” by Paul Nabhan. In the mean time, eat your ethnic cuisine if you know it. Chances are you will be healthier for it. ✍️

Ken Niehoff is a health trainer practicing in Sonoma, CA. He combines his knowledge of strength and conditioning, rehabilitation and nutrition to guide clients in their pursuit of healthy aging and disease prevention. Ken is currently in the Masters of Human Nutrition program at The University of Bridgeport. Check out his website at sonomahealthtraining@sbcglobal.net

THOUGHTS FROM ANNE

These are unsettling times, weather-wise, that is! There must be a 40 degree difference between 7 am and 3 pm some days and others it's 90 degrees all day long. I feel as though I have one foot in winter, the other in summer and somewhere in between there's spring, albeit brief and illusive. For such a short one; this spring has never seemed so lovely. Abundant wildflowers and flocks of wild pigeons and migrations of butterflies make me think something is going right! The Sonoma Valley looks nourished and downright healthy; the oaks splendid in new leaves.

Speaking of oaks, one in particular that I see from my kitchen window has shed its millions of smallish acorns which are now sprouting into millions of tiny oak

seedlings. The story though, is of the food countless other acorns from the same tree provided. Flocks of hundreds of wild band tailed pigeons staked a claim on that tree for about a week, and as they settled and rose and settled again; their beating wings stirred the air and sheer numbers shaded the garden. I had never before witnessed these flocks at such close range. How did they know those acorns were there?

Like spring, wildflowers and migrations are ephemeral. The pigeons were here at Oak Hill for about a week and the Painted Lady Butterfly migration lasted only a day; but the memory of clouds of butterflies and wild pi-



Anne Teller, owner of Oak Hill Farm, and one of her rescue dogs, Sarah Lee.

geons will last a lifetime, and of course, I hope they will all pass through this farm next spring.

Save the date: May 31 from 1-4, Jonah Raskin will be at the Red Barn to sign copies of his new book, *Field Days, A Year of Farming, Eating and Drinking Wine in California*. Much of the book is based on his observations while working at Oak Hill Farm.

AVAILABLE IN MAY

SALAD GREENS Salad Mix, Arugula, Dandelion, and Spinach

HERBS Chives, Lovage, Oregano, Rosemary, Sorrel Tarragon and Thyme

VEGETABLES Red Beets, Burdock, Red Cabbage, Carrots, Celery Root, Fava Beans, Green Garlic, Kale, Leeks, Parsnips Rutabaga, and Snap Peas

FRUIT Lemons and Oranges

FLOWERS Agrostemma, Bells of Ireland, Calendula, Iris, Larkspur, Nigella, Queen Anne's Lace, Sweet Peas, Snowball Viburnum.

Oak Hill Farm, CSA?

Blue Barn Gourmet, a quick-service restaurant in San Francisco's Marina district, has been using Oak Hill's produce in their gourmet salads and sandwiches, since they opened their doors in 2007. And now, thanks to the energy and enthusiasm of Teresa Piro, they have started a CSA (Community Support Agriculture) using the farm's produce.

Just exactly what is a CSA? Historically, community members buy shares of a local farm at the beginning of the planting season. This financial support enables the farmer to afford all the necessities (seeds, tools, equipment, water, gas, etc.) for a prosperous growing season. In return, throughout the harvest, the farmer distributes a box to shareholders, supplying local families with seasonal, organic fruits & vegetables from early spring until late fall. Continuing in tradition, Blue Barn Gourmet is giving their CSA members, the opportunity to embrace the "Eat Local/Eat Seasonal" movement that is passionately thriving in the Bay Area. Members receive weekly or bi-monthly boxes of fresh produce: (1) box per month = \$30, (2) boxes per month = \$58, (4) boxes per month = \$115. Blue Barn Gourmet is located at 2105 Chestnut Street at Steiner. For more information about joining our San Francisco CSA, please contact Teresa at 415.441.3232 or teresa@bluebarngourmet.com.

You can find Oak Hill Farm produce on the menu at the following local restaurants: **Cafe LaHaye ♦ Depot Hotel ♦ El Dorado Kitchen ♦ Estate in Sonoma ♦ fig cafe ♦ girl and the fig ♦ Kenwood ♦ La Salette ♦ The Lodge at Sonoma ♦ Saffron ♦ Westerbeke Ranch ♦ Wild Thyme Catering**