

Kitsap Sun

Bainbridge Island, WA

June 9, 2006

Jon Quitslund: Author on Farming to Visit Bainbridge

Town & Country Market Winslow is the heart of commercial life on Bainbridge. It's a meeting place, too; I shop there several times a week and usually see someone I know. The web of personal connections that holds our community together depends on such encounters.

Other spots along Winslow Way are also fundamental to our quality of life. On a recent Saturday after shopping at the farmers' market, my wife and I made our way down to Eagle Harbor Book Co., a place I regard as necessary to my health and happiness.

Sometimes a book that I didn't know I needed falls into my hands, and that's just what happened that morning. I was scanning the new nonfiction shelves, and a title caught my eye. The author, Patricia Klindienst, was new to me, and I hadn't read anything about her book, but the title was compelling: "The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture, and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans."

I've heard recently about other books with similar themes, such as Michael Ableman's "Fields of Plenty" and Michael Pollan's "Omnivore's Dilemma," but I decided that this was the book for me; the others can wait.

Only after I got home and settled into the rocking chair to read did I discover that the longest chapter in "The Earth Knows My Name" is devoted to farming on Bainbridge: specifically, to the fields on Day Road farmed by Akio Suyematsu, Gerard and Jo Ann Bentryn and Betsey Wittick. I've learned that Klindienst will be at Eagle Harbor Book Co. on June 22 to talk about her book and sign copies.

If you've visited the tasting room at the Bainbridge Island Winery and had only one brief conversation with Gerard Bentryn, you might feel you know the man. You might even think you know where his convictions come from. He and I have talked several times about many subjects. After reading the third chapter in "The Earth Knows My Name" and seeing Bentryn's whole story, mostly in his own words, I have a much deeper appreciation for his passion and his place in our community.

Klindienst has also succeeded in bringing Suyematsu's personal history out of the shadows, so that his self-effacing generosity can be better understood. Wittick, an exemplary figure in the younger generation of farmers on Bainbridge, comes across vividly too.

Farming and gardening are not only essential to our physical survival; for millennia they have also provided symbolic activities and places in which a wholesome culture can be established and celebrated. The local garden artist George Little once told me, "We garden because we remember paradise." And a couple of lines from W.H. Auden's definition of the modern poet's mission often echo in my mind:

“With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse.”

With vivid descriptions and a rare gift for summoning the voices of others, Klindienst tells the stories of 15 farms or gardens and the people who created them. Most of the people she profiles were born outside the U. S. or represent unassimilated minority cultures; the book makes clear how much the mainstream of our culture has to gain from them.

I found food for thought in the common ground shared by gardeners who are recent immigrants (a Khmer community and Puerto Ricans in Massachusetts, a Punjabi woman in California) and others who have deeper roots here (Native Americans in the Southwest, Gullahs in South Carolina, an eleventh-generation Yankee who shares his heirloom corn with people whose ancestors welcomed the Pilgrims).

Klindienst writes with an outsider’s perspective. Hidden behind her name is her mother’s Italian heritage, which was linked in her personal history not only with gardening but with prejudice and injustice, most sensationally in the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti. Sample her book, skim its surface, or savor and digest it: you’ll be introduced to some lovely people and places, and to many unfamiliar portions of our nation’s history.

Jon Quitslund lives in Crystal Springs. Send comments to jon-quitslund@att.net.