

July 30, 2006

Gardeners use roots to keep past alive

Janet Lembke, Correspondent

Our notions of right and suitable food are strongly colored by early experience. For me, the ideal dinner was, and always shall be, that served by my Virginia grandmother during World War II: a roasting chicken brought by horse and buggy from a Mennonite farm, asparagus and tomatoes from my great-aunt's victory garden, and grocery-store rice, plus biscuits and devil's food cake baked that very day in my grandmother's kitchen. Today, no matter where I am, that dinner retains its primacy.

In her grand new book "The Earth Knows My Name," master gardener Patricia Klindienst crosses the United States to talk with men and women who have re-created New World gardens faithful to their native cultures. One of them, Polish-American Gerard Bentryn, now a vintner on Bainbridge Island, Wash., crystallizes the immigrant experience when he tells her, "First you lose your costume. Then you lose your language. The last thing you lose is your food."

Her quest was inspired by an unlikely gardener, the anarchist Bartolomeo Vanzetti. As he lingered in prison before his execution, he found solace in memories of his father's lush gardens in Italy (not incidentally, the native land of Klindienst's family). Vanzetti's words led her to this theme: "Where might we begin the work of remembering who and what we are? The simple answer I offer here is, in the gardens of ethnic Americans."

Oh, the gardens she tours! They are as multifarious as the people who cultivate and cherish them. The first garden is that of Clayton Brascoupe, a Native American living in Tesuque Pueblo, N.M. He aims with considerable success to restore traditional Three Sisters practices -- gardens interplanted with corn, squash and beans -- to this arid land. Why aim for restoration? Haven't the three sisters been the prime crops since time immemorial? As she does on every garden visit, Klindienst looks here into the history of this region -- the coming of the Spaniards, their introduction of foreign livestock and crops, and the native population's loss of much, from language to religion. Brascoupe, understanding that the land is sacred, teaches several methods by which it can maintain its integrity: biointensive gardening, which restores soil, and permaculture, "a design system for creating sustainable human environments."

Soon Klindienst takes us across the country to two Gullah gardens on St. Helena Island, S.C. It is a community, possessed of a black majority, in which African, Native American and European cultures have long intermingled. Since plantation days, its gardens have

been many and diverse, from cash-crop fields and kitchen gardens to provision gardens tended by slaves for their own use. Black people have owned land there since attaining freedom in 1863. One of the Gullah gardeners is reviving a crop that was once an economic staple -- indigo. Another gardener raises vegetables which he sells from his tailgate. "I love my land," he says. "I love right where I'm at. You got to love your land. Just like you love your husband or wife."

But agribusiness and condominiums threaten, and the community's youngsters move away.

The farmers on Washington's Bainbridge Island face a similar dilemma: the arrival of high-dollar developments and an astronomical increase in real estate taxes. Can farms survive in onrushing commercialization? Klindienst provides no answers but lets us see instead the history of the people who work the farms today. Akio Suyematsu, a berry farmer sharing land with Gerard Bentryn, was interned during World War II and, as a consequence, nearly lost the property that his family had long owned.

In Amherst, Mass., we meet Khmer gardeners, who have fled the killing fields of Cambodia. They take the author to a Buddhist temple, where she feels viscerally that "the ancient connection between food and the sacred is restored." In Massachusetts and in California, we encounter gardeners who left Mussolini's Italy. Klindienst remarks that, for them, "To garden was to become American on their own terms. To garden was to keep alive parts of themselves that could not be known here. Their gardens represent distinct ways of embodying the memory of the Italian landscapes that shaped them."

Just so, all the gardeners in this book evoke the green landscapes that shaped them. In California, Ruhan Kainth and her husband grow the fruits, vegetables and herbs that they knew in their native Punjab. The Puerto Rican gardeners in blighted South Holyoke, Mass., have formed a cooperative called Nuestras Ra'ces, Our Roots. Of their plots, Klindienst says, "In their organic gardens, created from vacant lots they do not own, a disenfranchised, landless population teaches the wealthiest nation in the world what a restorative urban ecology can look like."

Nor would the book be complete without an introduction to Whit Davis, proprietor of a farm in Stonington, Conn. His crop? White flint corn, first carried east by Algonkian-speaking Indians. But the arrival of English colonists, who had their own definitions for a garden, led to the loss not only of the corn but also of native culture. Davis has been able to return the ancient white flint variety to the Indians of Gay Head, Martha's Vineyard, for making a ritual food. "How can a gesture as simple as the gift of seeds be a meaningful answer to centuries of injustice? Because it makes possible the restoration of a seed's place in a structure of meaning."

Many books these days lack sustenance. Not this one. In "The Earth Knows My Name," Patricia Klindienst serves up fare that is hearty and nourishing.

(Janet Lembke's latest book is titled, "From Grass to Gardens: How to Reap Bounty from

a Small Yard.")

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