



Taste, Memory: Forgotten Foods, Lost Flavors, and Why They Matter

Fri, 02/15/2013 - 13:22 -- David Buchanan

Author's note: The following is excerpt from my new book [Taste, Memory: Forgotten Foods, Lost Flavors, and Why They Matter](#) [1]. I hope you enjoy it.

The approach to John Bunker's farm reminds me of his depiction of historic local agriculture in his book *Not Far from the Tree: A Brief History of the Apples and the Orchards of Palermo, Maine, 1804-2004*. While telling the story of apples and orchards near his home, he describes a largely self-sufficient farm community where stone walls typically lined narrow dirt roads in the shade of apple trees. Riders on horseback would reach up and pick ripe fruit directly from overhanging branches. Until the middle of the nineteenth century every family grew diverse crops for their own consumption, and every farm had a small orchard filled with different types of fruit, many varieties distinct to this place.

I watch for apple trees in the woods beside the county road and see nothing but encroaching forest. If once there were stone walls at its borders, these were sacrificed long ago to widen the roadbed. It's hard to imagine such heavily forested land cleared for grazing and crops, but at one time most of these ridgelines and higher elevations were open ground. It's easier to imagine this history half a mile down the road at the property of one of John's neighbors, a working farm with an old and somewhat neglected white clapboard house and barn. A crew is manning an ancient logging truck and sawing logs at an outdoor mill on the edge of their horse pasture. Diversified farming lives on at the margins.

John's land is near the bottom of the hill at the end of a long, rutted, unpaved driveway. Its location is a little surprising, because the land is low and appears somewhat damp and dark. Not the most promising place to grow fruit trees or vegetables, and for this reason it was probably never farmed historically. Like many smallholding farmers, he's making do with some difficult soils and microclimates. In his book John describes Palermo farms aligned along a common axis, with buildings, croplands, and orchards high on the ridges, and pastures and woodlots in the valleys. He and his friends who moved here to homestead in the early 1970s apparently cleared their gardens from substantial forest. Today John owns the land and lives here with his wife, Cammy, while seasonal apprentices share the bunkhouse.

I squeeze into a narrow parking space beside the barn and take a look around. John's homestead is a pretty little cluster of woodbutcher houses and outbuildings: back-to-the-land counterculture vernacular. The property weaves vegetable gardens, fruit trees, berries, and native ornamentals around handmade buildings and small ponds. Solar panels line the roof of the main house, and a grapevine-covered arbor shades a long plank table. A new house is visible under construction farther down the hill at the end of the driveway. The ground looks wet in many places?good mosquito habitat. An apprentice stops by to say hello, his face covered by protective netting. It's a gray day but warm, and the rain is holding off for now.

I knock on the door to find John inside, and in greeting hand over a bag of scones and pastries from Portland's legendary Standard Baking. I should have bought fresh strawberries instead, because he places

the bag, unopened, on the counter. It's cluttered in the kitchen without much room to sit, so he pulls on his boots and suggests we head outside to a small teahouse, a screened hexagonal structure overlooking the gardens. I think of the pastries a little wistfully as we walk outside. We find seats at a plank table, pull out the Slow Food notes, and start talking about what is and isn't listed on the Ark of Taste (editors note: the purpose of this visit was to review heritage food lists for Slow Food USA).

Image (optional):

