

Fairview Gardens 1954



Fairview Gardens 1998



For me, farming was like falling in love. Both are means of perpetuating the human species. My relationship with the land followed a classic course. Nature seduced me and I fell in love with the little farm on Fairview Avenue. I was in awe of the magic of emerging seeds, and enchanted by early morning harvests when beads of dew formed on taut squeaky cabbages reflecting the light of the world.

At some point, like all lovers, I fell out of love in the purely romantic sense of the word. When that intoxicating, blinding draw faded, a deeper relationship began.

I came to farming without training, academic credentials, books, or expectations. My grandparents had farmed but not my parents. I thought technique was important. I thought I should become masterful. Over time I discovered that it was more important to learn how to see.

My best agricultural practice was to walk the fields and orchards, observing, taking notes, poking, digging, smelling, and inspecting. Everyday was different, sometimes dramatically so. Usually the changes were nearly imperceptible. But there were always changes. Some came directly from nature. A sudden heat spell made tiny green beans grow to harvest size in a matter of hours. In the waxing cycle of the moon, seeds germinated almost overnight; in the waning cycle, roots strengthened and took hold.

Sometimes the changes resulted directly from my own actions. If I cultivated the lettuce or brassicas, they seemed to double in size within days. Fruit trees responded to compost or pruning. By trial and error I learned and relearned until the technique I aspired to was internalized and forgotten, as technique should be. I also learned its limits, and how difficult it is to outsmart nature. Farmers are eternally optimistic in this respect, as we try to ripen pumpkins just in time for Halloween, have the first tomatoes at the farmers' market, or grow tender salad greens among much stronger native weeds.

Within a few years of arriving at Fairview Gardens, I went from being a struggling peach farmer to a kind of ringmaster. When I decided to

reduce the emphasis on peaches and turn Fairview Gardens into an all-purpose cornucopia, I couldn't stop. Soon Donna and I and the small crew were learning how to best irrigate peppers, sow corn, and hill up potatoes. The catalogs that came from Stokes or Johnny's or Abundant Life tempted me to experiment with nearly twenty-five different tomato varieties. The lettuce beds evolved into a mix of baby greens so diverse that when I described them to visitors I felt like a waiter in a fancy restaurant—'Lacinato,' 'Tres Fin Frisee,' and 'Tango' sounded more like exotic sauces than simple salad greens.

I discovered the treasure hunt pleasures of growing potatoes, an invisible crop that at harvest reveals multi-colored tubers of Yukon Gold, Red Pontiac, Sangre, and Yellow Finn. Peppers pushed me to the outer edges of sanity as I insisted on planting every color from golden yellow and lilac purple to chocolate, seeking the super sweet of the small red Lipstick and the dangerous hot of the golden orange Habanero.

When I came, the land was still a relatively empty canvas. Soon we colored in the various unplanted areas, taking advantage of the subtle micro-climates that naturally existed. Mandarin oranges filled in at the highest point in a warm frost-free area; figs and lemons thrived in one of the hottest spots below the compost. Cold-loving apples grew well along the bottom of the land where cool air settles. To create screens from the road and habitat for birds and insects, hedgerows of pomegranate and nectarine went in along the northern border. Blackberry and sycamore filled in along a creek outflow.

The landowner, Dr. Chapman, watched as the peach orchards gave way to a riot of new crops splashed around the land. He must have wondered what I was up to, though he never asked. Certainly this was as far from commercial agriculture as you could get. Instead of fields full of broccoli grown to supply supermarkets by the truck-full, Fairview was becoming a kind of supermarket in itself, diverse and ever changing like an agricultural botanic garden.

Nearly everything I read or heard about I tried. Lettuce went in

For two months in 1984, unrelenting noise pulsed from huge machines that arrived to remove the last agricultural holding that bordered the farm. For years we had been huddled up next to each other, two small farms standing against the tide of development. Though Fairview had grown and flourished, our neighbor had given in years before. His lemon orchard, now falling to the big steel blade of the bulldozer, was a wild, derelict remnant. The trees were either dead or almost dead. Thorny root suckers grew from the base of the dried-up trunks, and the weeds were tall enough to cover the trees.

A certain beauty emerged from this neglect, as nature reclaimed the land in the years that the orchard was forgotten. Twenty-six acres were regaining their wildness. The land was full of life. Deer, raccoons, possum, hawks, and coyote passed through a bustling society of birds, small rodents, and insects. In the middle of all this, in a small shack invisible for the vines that covered it, my friend Helmut lived like a forest hermit, his world complete with a small pond, office, and outdoor cooking and dining area.

I fought the demise of that land, feeling feeble standing in the city council chambers with a few other locals facing off against the highly paid lawyers for the developers. The story is always the same. Land is a mere commodity to be bought and sold, something to build on, pave over, mine, or drill. We protested the sacrifice of the richest topsoil on the entire west coast. We cited the agricultural history of this valley, our perfect Mediterranean growing climate, the loss of farmland everywhere, and the importance of small farms and local food for our children. Our voices were drowned out by housing statistics, traffic studies, and promises for parks and tennis courts, all supported by sophisticated maps and graphs.

The local newspaper acted as oracle, putting forth headlines on yet-to-be-approved projects as if they were a sure thing. "Progress Hangs Concrete Shroud on Goleta Farm," the paper solemnly confirmed. The neighbor who sold the land was quoted, predicting, "farming is a dying profession." I had to wonder where *his* food came from.

We all hear stories of the greed that undermines our global environment. Until the bulldozers are idling at your back door, it is an intellectual concept. The pain for us was real. For fifty-eight days, an army of three-hundred horsepower caterpillars, carryalls, and dump trucks moved and buried and leveled and graded hundreds of tons of topsoil.

The bone-rattling noise started at seven each morning and didn't stop until evening. Clouds of dust floated into the farm and covered everything. We complained, and the atmosphere of war seemed only to increase. The line was drawn where the lush green of our avocado orchards met the red flags that marked the roads of the new development. But the battle was about more than just noise and dust, and we were losing. With each day the farm was becoming more like an island. All around us, the once fertile and agrarian valley had become a sea of tract homes and shopping centers. The sense of complete isolation was the hardest to take. With this last development, the farm would be surrounded by suburbia. We were now completely out of context.

There were more struggles to come. Contiguous pieces of land cannot be separated so easily. Nature, especially water, does not abide by surveyors' lines and man-made borders. When twenty-six acres are graded, paved, and covered with rooftops, the watershed is concentrated into runoff, and the impact downstream can be disastrous. A cement culvert large enough to walk through appeared, sticking out into the corner of our land, ready for the next big storm. The Texas-based developer wasn't accustomed to young, upstart farmers standing in his way. When I called in the county flood control to find out how he planned to deal with all that drainage being dumped on our land, he was not happy. The issue, if unresolved, threatened to hold up the works.

After long negotiations, the developer was required to dig a drainage ditch along the bottom of our land and pay the Chapmans thirty-thousand dollars. He planned to make back some of his money by selling the valuable topsoil he dug out of the farm. I stopped him, and the topsoil became a small mountain that we still draw from for compost. The ditch,

ways to educate their children. Reaching people through their kids and their stomachs seemed the most powerful and direct approach.

I continued to struggle with bottles in the fields, restricted tractor hours, and dogs chasing livestock. At the same time, my new neighbors were tentatively drifting into the produce stand. At first it was just to pick up the head of lettuce they had forgotten at the supermarket; we were in effect a convenience store. The connection grew gradually as they learned to savor our corn and strawberries, slowly realizing that what the sign said was true: "We Grow What We Sell."

Together we were figuring out what a farm could mean to a suburban population. We were just beginning to recognize how important it could be for our children. Thrown into public discourse over compost and roosters, caught in a collision of urban and rural, we were given the chance to play out and resolve the same issues that were forcing small farms all over this country to shut down.

While the grownups were busy working out the complaints, the kids had already moved in. I discovered secret forts built into the avocado orchard. I found a little plastic table and chairs in a hidden corner of the fields, the setting for carefully planned doll tea parties with muffins and orange juice. Occasionally I was invited to attend.

The hostesses, Sara and Jenny, were just moments away from being too old for dolls. On the farm they clung to the ritual a little longer, even



as they haunted the fields asking a million agricultural questions of my crew or searched the underbrush for signs of wild rabbits. For them the farm was full of mystery, and their carefully made notes and totems were left behind, like clues in a treasure hunt. Little brothers came along too, arriving on their motorcross bikes, jumping the curb that separated the farm from the neighboring development, and wiping out into the soft mountain of topsoil we had recovered from the clutches of the developer.



Things quieted down after the rooster riots, maybe because many of those who complained came to understand, even believe in, what we were doing. Or maybe it was because they decided that we were a formidable

foe. One neighbor, whose home borders the long field at the bottom of the property, often left messages saying he would rather look over his fence at condominiums, or that the dust from the tractor was ruining the plaster in his pool. He was most sensitive about the old spreader truck I used to spread compost on the fields. The truck has a big bed with high sides. A belly chain runs along the bed dropping compost into two spinning fans that throw it onto the field about twenty feet to each side of the truck. I could see why this made him nervous.

In the spirit of peaceful co-existence—even harmony—I had a plan. When I needed to spread compost on the lower field, I decided that it would be better for our relationship if it was done before five o'clock, before he came home from work. Unfortunately, one afternoon just as the truck moved into the field, it bogged down and stopped running. It took the rest of the day to get it restarted. By that time, my neighbor was standing at the fence, arms crossed, just waiting for me to

make a wrong move.

As I drove along the field near his place, I took extra precautions, veering way off to the side to be sure that the material would not land

One hundred and twenty chickens, three goats, one part-time horse, five hundred thousand bees, three cats, one turkey, six geese, one occasional peacock, seven ducks, a visiting cockateel, between two and thirty-two rabbits, and seventeen humans share Fairview Gardens' 12.23 acres.

The chickens are Australorp, Arucana, Buff Orpington, Polish, Barred Rock, Blue Cochen, and Rhode Island Red, and come in shapes, colors, and sizes as varied as their names. The Himalayan cat, Chinese weeder geese, Nubian goats, and New Zealand white rabbits blend in multicultural camaraderie with Russian, Mexican, French, Italian, and Czechoslovakian humans.

We're an odd mix of domesticated creatures. It's as if we have all been put together in a bizarre, poorly funded experiment in social and ecological dynamics. I like to think that each creature has its logical and preordained place in the workings of the farm. But beyond eating insects, providing fertilizer, controlling weeds, and producing milk and eggs, many are here just to provide love, companionship, comedy, and the occasional tragedy.

It probably reflects some deep-seated prejudice, but I often view farm animals as important only if they provide some "useful" work or product. It's hard to rationalize the tons of feed we buy any other way. The bills from Island Seed and Feed are calculated against eggs laid, gallons milked, and tons of manure produced. All of us here must earn our keep.

With this in mind, I often judge our farm animals by the quantity and particular qualities of their shit. Horseshit is a wonderful soil condi-



tioner, pleasant in smell; goats produce a tidy and easy-to-handle manure which contains few if any weed seeds; chicken droppings are high in plant nutrients but difficult to handle. One advantage of raising chickens "free range" is that each one becomes a self-operating mini manure spreader. Uncaged for most of the day, they have acres of open ground to make their deposits on, yet one or two always seem to end up fertilizing the

concrete on my doorstep. There are few things more unpleasant than walking outside in clean stocking feet to grab a shirt out of the back porch laundry and sliding on fresh chicken shit. This inevitably happens when I am on my way to some meeting or social event.

Even so, I firmly believe in "free range." The alternative is the life sentence that most chickens endure in prison-style egg factories where they live in two-by-two-foot cages, their feet hobbled and their beaks cut, with the lights on twenty-four hours a day. While our chickens do leave the occasional inconvenient specimen and have been known to chow down on a young lettuce crop, they are welcome to the full run of our twelve acres.

The truth is they live like royalty.

Guests who come for a meal are appalled to see the quality and volume of leftovers we send to the chickens. We only eat the pure white tender hearts of the romaine lettuce and discard the outer leaves; most fruits and vegetables are tossed after a day. When my friend and chef extraordinaire Alice Waters came to visit last Christmas and made mushroom ravioli and Portuguese peasant soup with braised baby leeks, the leftovers were served to our gourmet flock.



## Simple Pleasures

Instead of going out to the movies or straining to see your friends or family across a linen-covered candlelit table, passively waiting to be fed, hoping that the chef is in a good mood, and the ingredients were harvested within the last century, try staying home. Spend a slow afternoon or evening with those same friends and family planning, harvesting, collecting, preparing, and eating a meal together. Go grazing if you grow your own, and allow the meal to create itself as you wander through garden or fields. Wash, chop, and cook together to some music. Finally settle in to a long, deliberate, slow, passionate meal. Experience love made manifest through food.

The little blue truck hated Wednesdays and responded like a burro being loaded for a long trek. With each added box the suspension groaned. Each time I put my body into the rope and pulled, the truck leaned to one side. In seven years of doing that trip, I only lost eight boxes of peaches, one antique scale, and three watermelons. My helper and I couldn't abandon the juicy broken melons. Even though we were late for market, we had to stop and eat them sitting by the side of the road.

As hard as we tried and as early as we got started, we always seemed to arrive at the market moments before they closed the street. About one hundred growers already lined the streets, standing next to their flatbed trucks or new Isuzu Bobtails waiting to begin setting up. We inched our way through the streets like the last float in a parade, the rusty blue toy truck top heavy and swaying from side to side. I eventually replaced the truck with a newer white one, making for a less conspicuous entrance.

The market ritual seldom varies. Once in our spot we jockey for position. Each grower is assigned a space but the early birds squeeze the late-comers a bit, setting the stage for what I refer to as the "space wars." Order is restored as the market manager patrols with her tape measure moving people one foot in one direction, two in the other. When the street officially closes to traffic we race to create an entire sales outlet in the hour before the market opens. Tables and awnings go up and displays are constructed. "Pass me the beans, I'll pile them in the center. Tomatoes over here, five boxes in width. Should we do 'em at a dollar a pound? Salad goes under the umbrella, let's alternate the peppers yellow, red, orange, chocolate, and red again. Don't forget to keep the Habaneros out of reach of the children!"

Crowds gather—"We can't sell until the bell is rung," we tell the same man every week when he comes early hoping to avoid the crowds. While they wait to buy our food they pelt us with questions "How much is this?" "Fifty cents?" The same lady always cuts the price in half. "Is it sweet?" "Put this one aside for me, will ya?" Basil is strewn everywhere, the last few items are put up, the truck checked, and all the extra boxes

## How to Sell Garlic, Basil, and Tomatoes

These three good friends not only go well together in fields and in the pot, they provide a fragrant and visually seductive display when placed together at the market. Garlic is easily sold by smashing several cloves throughout the day on the pavement in front of your stand. As the day wears on and the pavement heats up, the aroma draws crowds in to buy. Tomatoes must be piled in huge heaps with the stem end down, with several sliced open on top of the stack and a knife always at the ready to slice open a fresh sample. If there are several varieties, alternate shapes and colors. Cherry tomatoes are attractive displayed in baskets in a checkerboard pattern with alternating colors, yellow and red. Basil should be draped all around the tomato display, used as dividers for the different varieties, and placed so the bunches are constantly in the way. When you have a crowd, take a bouquet of basil and, waving it gently, move down the line from nose to nose, providing a brief aromatic experience. Every person who smells will surely buy.