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POTOMAC VEGETABLE FARMS
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You Can't Rush the Due Date of a Good Tomato

by **Rebecca Groisser**

I've worked a lot of stand hours since I was 13 years old. This year, due to my decision not to work in the fields or markets, I work more stand hours than everyone else put together. I like to think of myself as a sort of stand connoisseur. Unfortunately, this means I can get a little touchy about other people criticizing my displays. It also means I've come to recognize trends in what customers want to know about us.

When a customer approaches me with that quizzical look on his or her face, mouth open to speak, I brace myself for one of

four questions: What is ecoganic, when are the blackberries ready to pick, why aren't Moutoux' peaches here yet, and – most relevantly at this time of year – where are your tomatoes?

The answer to all but the first question is the same. You can't rush perfection. We are itching just impatiently as you are to sink our teeth into juicy tomatoes, but unfortunately, they're still ripening in the fields, soaking in the necessary sunlight, soil nutrients and rainwater that makes them so dang delicious. We don't grow our tomatoes in the greenhouse or take any shortcuts, which is why they don't show up until

mid-to-late July. The process is gradual.

The late nature of tomatoes is especially evident this year, as we made the decision not to sell any other farmer's tomatoes. In previous years, we supplemented our stand with conventionally grown tomatoes from other farms, but those are tasteless and bland and we don't wish to confuse anyone into believing those were our own produce. It didn't seem worth it this year. It made more sense to wait. I'm pretty sure that you'll agree when you finally get to sink your teeth into one of our tomatoes. There's no comparison.

CSA Open Houses Coming Soon!

Come and see where your food is growing and meet the farmers. Bring your friends and family and a light snack to share!

Purcellville: Sunday, July 24 from 4 – 6 PM

Vienna: Sunday, August 7 from 4 – 6 PM

Hayride and tour of the farm, potluck snacks.



PHOTO BY ALISSA GROISSER

Looking Back Five Years

by **Carrie Nemec**

One of the most amazing things about life at PVF is that the whole farm is in a constant state of change. From the beginning of the season to the end, from one season to another, it seems like we're always growing (ha ha?). This is my fifth season at PVF and here are some of my reflections on what has changed - and what has stayed the same.

Infrastructure:

- The stand has undergone major renovations - if you come to the farm to pick up your CSA you've probably noticed how beautiful and fresh everything is looking - including the stand! The stand itself was gutted and we added on a new greens room and a stand-up freezer. Roger, Richard, Stephen and Jon did all of the work and the finished project is gorgeous!
- We completely reorganized our facilities behind the stand - we have a new CSA room, we've converted the old CSA room into a basil cooler and laboratory in which we experiment once a week with a market-style CSA, we built a new CSA packing area, and we (perhaps less noticeably) got a lot of new storage space.
- We moved the chicken coop further back onto the farm property, away from the stand, for reasons of convenience and de-stinkification. You're welcome.
- When I first arrived at PVF, the next door farm -- what is now Maymont -- was covered in cherry trees and owned by the Moutoux. We used to drive down a dirt road, through the orchard, to get to our far field; now we're driving on pavement through the shadows of McMansions. With that, though, came some changes for the good: we got the professional deer fence - a real asset to the farm - put in around the far field, and we will continue to be converting currently unusable land back into farmland.
- Last year, Jon & his helpers ran underground

irrigation through the far field - now it takes only a few minutes to pop a spigot in - before we ran hundreds of feet of blue hose to get water to the crops. This new irrigation saves us hours.

- We added a second hoop house.
- Last but not least: we've added four golf carts to our arsenal of farm-mobiles!

Farming Practices:

- When I arrived we had three small patches of blueberries. Not all the bushes make it from year to year so we condense them down and make space for other things. The herb garden on the farm has tripled in size.
- We purchased the plastic layer which has dramatically changed the way we grow certain crops. The year I arrived the onions were not mulched at all and we spent much of summer returning to the patch and weeding to give those little babies a fighting chance.

The next year we covered them with leaf mulch (I think this method was used before I arrived here and that first year they just did not have any). Now, it takes a few minutes a row to lay the plastic and we plant the onions using a piece of rebar to poke the holes for the onions.

- That first summer here the white board said everyone must weed beets and carrots for at least 10 minutes a day. And Janet Greene who lives on Blueberry Hill could be found sitting in the patch weeding for hours. That has all changed with the purchase of the tractor (a 1948 G) which allows us to mark the rows for direct seeding and with a quick change of implements we can cultivate the beds to keep the weeds at bay.
- This year, we outsourced our flowers

for CSA but still cut our own for market. Because of this Hana has much more time on her hands to do other things and we have much more space to plant tasty veggies.



PHOTO BY ALISSA GROISSER
Michael Bradford in 2005.



PHOTO BY BRIAN KENT
Michael Bradford in 2011.
Oh, how people change.

“Five Years” continued from Page 2

The Cast of Characters:

- Five years ago Heinz from Next Step Produce had a steady flow of PVF workers driving to his farm in Maryland twice a week to help out with whatever needed to be done. Now, we go a few times a season when he needs extra hands for big projects. Over the past few years we started buying veggies from Tree and Leaf and now we share some of our workers with them three days a week.
- Hana's children and nephews have gone and returned. Rebecca and Alissa still help out with the stand and the CSA. Jesse used to be a full-timer, but now he has a grown-up job; still, he helps out with the Takoma Park farmers market on Sunday. Stephen is our worker of choice to head to Tree and Leaf three days a week. Finally Michael who used to be part of the crew now runs his own crew in the morning and gets to spend the afternoons working on other farm projects.
- It used to be if you needed something fixed, created, or watered you would call Jon. Now Jon's not the only Mr. Fix-it on the farm - his nephews help out with flat tires on the golf carts and various wagons and help build many of the new structures on the farm. He has taught me about the irrigation

so for the most part I take care of the watering. One thing has not changed in all these years, Hana thinks of a major project and Jon is in charge of visualizing it and figuring out how to create the space or thing that would make our lives here much easier.

- When I first arrived we packed up CSA veggies three days a week. Now, we pack veggies four days a week.

- Digging garlic used to be a big project that took a very long time and lots of hands. We would use a pitchfork and dig each bulb individually. Now we borrow a digger from our Loudoun farm and we can have all the garlic out of the ground and in the greenhouse in a few days.

- The biggest change of all -for me - is my move to the farm. I used to live off-campus in Falls Church and moved to the onto the farm a few years ago. Now I take a nice lunch and a good nap during the hottest parts of the day and allow myself to work when it is cooler - unless of course we have a project that requires immediate attention.

I think I can say without any hesitation my ten year perspective is going to be an incredible list as we are always changing and trying make great improvements here.

How Did I Get Here?

by Clem Swift

A little over a year ago, I found myself broke and homeless in San Francisco, far from my home state of Virginia and even farther from any thought of coming back to toil in the fields growing vegetables for a living. For the previous several years I'd been intensely pursuing a career as a classical French horn player and had reached a point, after taking out sizable loans for a master's program at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and then a bit more in credit card debt to cover costs, where I began to seriously question whether this path was practical or suitable for me, and was left more or less directionless and stranded on the wrong side of the country. But I was open to new ideas, especially ones that could provide me money or a place to sleep, and I was fortunate to find both in a cooking job at a small summer camp in the hills of northern California.

Now this camp is a bit different from what you might be thinking, and it was far from what I would have expected in a kids' summer camp (my previous experience working at camp was on a 200+ square mile high adventure Boy Scout ranch). To paint a picture of the surrounding region, your typical Nevada County resident might be a 20-something dude wearing all hemp clothing with a crown of dreadlocks and a small shrine of his guru on the dash of his 1990 Volvo who eats an all raw vegan diet and grows organic weed for a living on a patch of land he "rents" in the back woods. While the local color in our region go down to the Potomac to get drunk off cheap beer, blast country music and jump off a big rock, the equivalent over there heads down to the Yuba river to get high, get naked and have a cleansing spiritual experience in the clear, flowing water. I'm not saying that camp is strictly in that vein, but that's the backdrop.

To apply for a position as a kitchen worker at this camp, the first step was to submit several pages of essay in response to a few questions such as "Who are you?" and "What do you want to learn, and what do you need to learn in terms of your mind, body, heart, and spirit? (two different

questions, eight total parts)" After passing the first round, I was sent another list of essay questions and performed two conference-call phone interviews. At no point did anyone ask for a résumé or inquire whether I had any kitchen experience at all, yet I was bumped up to assistant kitchen manager almost immediately when another hire backed out.

Upon arriving at camp, I was greeted with big bear hugs from all the other staff and was shown around the property including all the various spots I could sleep on any given night, including the big communal yurt, the lodge deck, and the lake dock; after a few days, I asked for my own tent, which I got. But I was also introduced to a great group of people who cared about what they were doing and were downright excited to be doing it. Our kitchen group of about eight workers became close and worked wonderfully together, even if we had to have regular after-work meetings to discuss our feelings and anything that might have bothered us or seemed like it could be improved upon. We used about 80% organic ingredients with local meat and greens where possible, made just about everything from scratch, everyone working all three meals, 6 days a week, and we rocked it out, sometimes still having time to join in a campwide game of capture-the-flag in the evening.

Now how does this lead to farming? A few ways. First off, I found I really enjoyed and felt a sense of purpose in feeding people, serving a basic human need with my own hands and knowledge. Second, I found the hard-working,



PHOTO BY BECKY CROUSE

The tall man in the middle is Clem. The others are irrelevant.

fun-loving environment taking me back to something that had been missing in my life, the same thing that had drawn me toward outdoor adventure years ago. This is a camp where kids learn to jump bikes into the lake, twirl flaming staffs and make smoke bombs to sneak around like ninjas. I have fond memories of participating in the July 4th tradition of firing flaming arrows into a homemade "Phoenix" structure made of wood and straw and doused in kerosene. I remember counseling staff coming into the kitchen looking for any leftover food that would be good for blowing up, or making a request that we serve the next day's breakfast dressed as Neanderthals. Early one morning, I watched as a group of counselors dressed in creepy clown outfits surreptitiously set out a drumset and amp right outside the cabin of some of the sleeping campers, ignited a literal ring of fire around the outside, and then blasted heavy metal as a swarm of confused 12-year-olds ran out, were forced to leap over the fire, and then ran toward the bath house where they were blasted by the firehouse being manned by a second, hidden group of counselors. Coming from

a stuffy conservatory atmosphere where everyone just criticizes each other and nobody has any fun, it had a powerful effect on me.

The factor that most pulled me toward farming was a pair of my co-workers. There were two free-spirit hippie/foodie types I worked with, and it was through discussion with them that the farmingseed was planted in my mind. It was no more than a seed at first. The prospect of pursuing a path to become a farmer was such a drastic switch from what I'd been pursuing for several years that I had to distance myself from it and just leave it to its own devices for a while. And as it turned out, through working another food service job in Utah for a few months and then coming back home for the holidays to be unemployed for a brief while, that seed grew and grew until I had to act. I did my homework, researched and got in touch with all the organic farms in the general area, interviewed with a few of them and was thrilled to be offered a seasonal position by what to me was clearly the best-run farm in the mid-Atlantic region.

But then that fell through, so I had to settle with this one.

Just kidding.