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It Was a Perfect Storm

by Stacey Carlberg

Sometimes I check the weather three or four times a day or more, when it seems like rain is approaching and we are trying to cram in numerous tasks while it is still dry. I admit we were distracted by family matters last week and knew nothing about the predicted “Frankenstorm” until Ashley asked us at morning meeting “What are we gonna do next week?” Ethan, a worker who religiously checks the weather forecasts, admitted “It looks pretty bad.” I muttered something like, “Well, we may still have to pick vegetables – but if it’s really bad, you’ll have time to pack and clean your house,” as we are in the last week of work for half of our staff. I checked the forecast the following day and wasn’t too worried until I left the farm for an extended amount of time and was listening to the radio quite a bit. “NO ONE KNOWS WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN!!!” was the main message from all radio broadcasts. Blizzards. Hurricanes. The Perfect Storm.

So, I called back to the farm and told the crew we’d have to work a little later to prepare for the impending doom. I told Kate over the phone, “NO ONE KNOWS WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN!!!,” repeating in my best, booming radio broadcaster voice. The crew stepped up appropriately, finishing the weekend harvest and going to markets, picking up all loose containers and bins that may blow around, taking down shade cloths, taking down signs, covering our hay wagon, finishing the garlic planting and putting in cover crop. We all prepared to hunker down, filling water jugs, cooking food and distributing walkie talkies to communicate if our phones were out. We postponed our CSA for a day, just to make sure no one would attempt to drive



here in hazardous conditions. As we discussed what may happen at the farm, I again said “NO ONE KNOWS! They are saying it’s like the PERFECT STORM.” Ashley asked if this meant that George Clooney would show up at the farm.

As you all know, the rains started rolling in on Sunday afternoon and didn’t stop until Tuesday. Strong winds blew through the farm, knocking down several trees. The pond filled to capacity and water spilled into the creek nearby, flooding over our bridge (this is not unordinary). We all lost power around 6:30 p.m. on Monday, but everyone was safe and sound and in good company. I slept little as the wind whipped around our house, wondering what was going on at the farm. But, when we awoke, we found little damage, thankful that all fallen trees were not on any dwellings. We spent Tuesday waiting for power to come back on. We gathered at Ellen’s house (the only house with a woodstove), warmed up and listened to her talk about farm economics. By 4 P.M. power was on, and we were engulfed in a game of Scattergories, snacking on Casey’s pickles. Storms are good for slowing us down on the farm and bringing us all together. Not sure anyone said that on the radio.

PVF History — The Workers: Twelfth in a 12-Part Series

by Hana Newcomb

Jerry Lehmann was the first worker, 50 years ago. Since 1962, we have employed and educated and befriended and mentored and relied upon more than 1000 workers, young and old. The workers have always been the most interesting and unpredictable ingredient in the mix. Farming would be no fun (impossible) without them.

Workers are paid for their labors. In the early years, workers were paid a “piece rate” modeled on commercial produce farms. Workers were paid an hourly rate when they worked at the stand or worked as a team, when productivity could not be measured so clearly.

So in the 1960s and 70s everyone had to count every basket of tomatoes picked, every bale of straw mulched, every pony of beans painstakingly gathered. It created a competitive atmosphere for those who were fast and strong, and it probably demoralized many who never got up to speed. When my mother found too many unacceptable tomatoes in the baskets, workers had to put a name tag in the bottom of the basket – quality improved dramatically.

In 1976 the hourly rate was \$1.80 and picking a half bushel of tomatoes was worth 50 cents. Housing was about \$5 a week. Today the starting wage is about \$7 an hour and we have given up on piece rate. Our top hourly wage earner makes \$14.

For the first 20 or 30 years, our workers were mostly college students, with a few high school kids and older folks mixed in. The workers came from Oberlin and Princeton, the SUNY schools and Berkeley, Elon and The New School. Most of them had never held a hoe but all of them wanted to learn as much as they could in three months. In those days, many workers came back for three or four or even five seasons before heading off to medical school or law school or the Peace Corps.

Workers came from middle class households and lived in rustic, spider-filled sheds. They cooked and ate communally, preparing for their shower by lighting a fire under the wood-burning water heater. They swam in the algae covered Moutoux Pond next door – naked – and stayed up late at night singing and talking and baking. When they went back to college in the fall, the stain of tomatoes on their hands took a week to disappear and the dirt under their fingernails lasted longer.

Over time the property surrounding the Vienna farm filled up with houses and the shed-dwelling era faded

away. We housed only a few workers and began to hire more commuters. The golden age of community dinners became a thing of the past.

As the residential community of workers decreased on the Vienna farm, the Loudoun farm was just getting established with its own live-in crew. The workers at PVF West experienced the same challenges as their predecessors: it can be really hard to live and work with the same people day after day. It can also be wonderful.

It would be quite a gathering to bring together workers from all the generations – Timothy Wyant who lived here for about ten years and eventually got his PhD in Biostatistics, Kathy Anastos who now splits her time between AIDS work in the Bronx and in Africa, Stephen Chamberlain who left behind his language studies and became a vegetable farmer in Vermont and married Julia Kreilkamp who worked here too, Paul Benton and Martha Daughdrill who met here and started a farm together in Maryland (and then moved to Alabama for a third career), Raphael Jenks who moved to Canada when George Bush was elected President, the Sri Lankan woman who came to work during the day when her diplomat employer was unaware that she had left behind her housekeeping duties, Leah Page who was devoted to the well-being of Haiti and ended up married to a Haitian man and had a baby...They would all have a lot in common. They would all remember picking tomatoes, loading bales, working with one or another generation of the Newcomb family, and caring a lot about this farm.

As Hiu and Hana and Ellen age gracefully, we are eternally grateful for the steady stream of support that has come from the workers of PVF. We see that the future of PVF is truly in their tomato-stained hands.



Carbon

by Ellen Polishuk

In my Sustainable Agriculture class at the University of Maryland, I like to show movies sometimes to break up the monotony of my voice over a 3 hour class period. A colleague and professional composting consultant sent me a foreign made movie called *Humus: Forgotten Climate Aid*. This is surely no Hollywood blockbuster, as none of you has seen it, or even heard of it. Indeed, it is a 90 minute exploration into the topic of soil carbon – no car chases or love scenes or gun battles. This is about the role of the earth's soil in being the largest and most powerful reservoir of carbon.

I will assume from this point that you do actually believe that there is climate change, and that the main culprit is the overabundance of carbon (CO₂) in the atmosphere. I find there is a fair amount of conversation and some awareness about how we can reduce our "carbon footprint". This is an important angle in figuring out one half of the equation – how to release less CO₂ into the air. But, I want to talk about the other side of the equation which is how to capture more atmospheric carbon and put it into other forms.

Life is made up of carbon – we are made up of carbon (18% of our mass is carbon). And so are plants. The magic of the plant kingdom is that plants use the energy from the sun to fix CO₂ and turn it into stuff – sugars, proteins, carbohydrates. Plants take carbon out of the air, make it into organic matter (stuff), and release oxygen as a byproduct (yeah, so we can breathe!). And then the rest of us non-plant beings eat plants and their byproducts and turn that carbon into our bodies. So, in order to take more carbon out of the atmosphere, we need to make sure there are lots and lots of plants. Okay, that makes sense.

Now when plants (and animals/microbes) die, their bodies are broken down by other microbes and fungi in the soil = decomposition. The final end product of decomposition is HUMUS. It is the beautiful, black stuff that we end up with in a good compost pile, or that you may find under the leaf litter in a forest. Humus is stable – it has no more breaking down to do – and it is primarily carbon. It can last for centuries in soils.

This is where the movie comes back into our story. It is a movie about researchers, in Europe mostly, who are deeply studying how to increase the levels of humus in



our soils. Undisturbed natural areas don't need our help; they know how to do it already. But, in agriculture, we are disturbing the soil and thus interfering with natural processes. We need to figure out how to manage to grow food to feed ourselves AND to keep steady or increasing the humus level in the soil.

Here is where we come in as your farmers. We can use different techniques in farming that keep harnessing the power of plants to fix carbon, and keep putting that carbon back into the soil. Here at PVF that takes the form of growing cover crops over the winter, and growing green manure crops in the summer. We also add more carbon to the soil in the form of compost, and as mulch that we use for weed control. This is what Carbon Sequestration looks like in agriculture. The *Humus* movie contends that through agriculture (and protection of natural ecosystems) we can make sure that the soil takes back the carbon from the air. Remember that the carbon got into the air by us burning fossil fuels, which is really burning prehistoric organic matter. So the soil is where all the carbon came from in the first place.

This process of managing carbon on our farms is the absolute basis of organic farming. It might better be called Carbon Farming. So, you come into this equation as eaters by supporting farms that are excellent carbon managers. I anticipate that in the future you will see more discussions in the public forum about how we (the government) can encourage farmers to become better carbon managers. In the meantime, we each must look at our own carbon equations – cutting down how much we release into the air, AND encouraging the return of carbon into the soil, into humus.

What's Happening in Casey's Kitchen?

by Casey Gustowarow

As a farmer, I have whole fields and walk-in coolers filled with the freshest ingredients at my disposal for cooking amazing meals. Sometimes I am overwhelmed with all of the possibilities of what to harvest and make for dinner or which food project I should throw my weight into. Access to wholesome, nutritious food is certainly one of the reasons that I became a farmer and to say it is a perk of the job would be an understatement.

That said, while access to ingredients is unfettered, sometimes as farmers we do not have excess time. I cannot count the number of times that I meant to get to the basil before the frost to make pesto or process a dozen jars of pickles before the late summer mildew takes over and it just did not happen. It is one predicament of being a farmer and trying to keep up with your fields, workers and markets and feeding your customers while also trying feeding yourself.

Fortunately, however, at some points during the year I am able to make some space to have some serious kitchen time. Autumn is often when this happens, after our fields have been planted and tomatoes have already bitten the dust. Or sometimes, the weather dictates when it is time to get in the kitchen because you just cannot be outside such as this past week. Then I once again remember why I love to grow food: because I love to cook and eat it.

So when I do get in the kitchen, I get busy. These past two weeks have seen a lot of food projects in preparation for the upcoming winter. I figured I would have to have some way to stay warm in the cold so I fashioned a smoker out of a Weber charcoal grill to make chipotle peppers out of the last of the jalapenos and I made three types of hot sauce (mild, medium and burn your face off!!!). Word of advice if you are handling a lot of hot peppers: wear rubber gloves. My hands were burning for more than 36 hours. My oven has seen a flurry of roasted vegetables including cauliflower and potatoes with cumin seeds and turmeric and sweet potatoes, carrots and beets covered in a garlic, rosemary and sage paste. Some roasted red pepper humus was concocted and frozen for later and I made some delicious ginger butternut soup to keep us warm when Sandy took out our heat.

Kimchi

Adapted from Wild Fermentation by Sandor Katz:

- 1 pound Chinese cabbage
- 2 carrots to give it some nice color
- 1 daikon or other large radish
- a bunch of scallions or 2 onions
- 3 cloves of garlic
- 3 hot chilies of any variety that you enjoy
- 3 Tbsp of grated ginger

Make a brine of 4 cups water and 4 Tbsp salt (preferably sea salt). It should be mixed well. Wash and cut up the cabbage coarsely and grate the carrots and radish. Then soak the veggies in the brine and make sure they are submerged (using a plate with a weight to keep them covered). Soak for a few hours or overnight.

The spices (scallions or onions, ginger, garlic, chilies) can be prepared in a food processor or mortar and pestle to grind them into a paste. You can add more or less of any of these spices depending on your taste but kimchi can absorb a lot of flavor. You can also add a few tsp of fish sauce for flavor.

Drain off the brine from the veggies and reserve it. The veggies should be salty but not excessively, so rinse if need be. Mix the veggies with the spice paste and pack the mixture firmly into a glass quart jar until the brine from the mixture rises above the veggies. If there is not enough liquid, add some more brine. You can ferment the veggies in a closed system with an airlock which allows gases to escape but not enter. This is the most foolproof way and models such as the Perfect Pickler sell this simple system. Or you can just weight the veggies down with another jar or bag filled with brine. It is important that the veggies stay submerged and are not exposed to air. Let the kimchi ferment at room temperature for about a week, checking every few days to taste. Once it has reached the flavor that agrees with you, enjoy it and store it in the fridge.

It is great as a side dish to many Asian meals. I also love to mix it with eggs in the morning. If you do not have cabbage, you can use a similar recipe for the kimchi paste but using solely sliced root vegetables such as carrots and radishes.