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Giving Up Vegetables...Harder Than Eating Meat Again

by Benjamin Groisser

Last October, Stephen and I set out from the farm with our summer salaries and a pair of loaded motorcycles, headed for Latin America. I'd spent most of the last decade in New England and felt like I needed a break from a society where towns outlaw cursing and franchise restaurants serve egg-white omelets with California alfalfa.

We anticipated mechanical and physical ailments along the way; we got our shots, assembled our tools, and packed enough pills to stock a small pharmacy. But nothing prepared me for what turned out to be the greatest challenge of the trip: chronic constipation.

I know what you're thinking. You're remembering your over-sharing friend's run-in with Guatemalan street food and subsequent familiarization with seatless toilets. Thankfully, my experience was a lot less messy.

Here in the States, raised on the farm, I've enjoyed a vegetarian diet for a number of years. I still eat venison when I come back to the farm, and join in on Thanksgiving turkey without digestive difficulties. Turns out giving up veggies can be harder than adding back meat.

My first month in Latin America was an ebullient exploration of new and enticing dishes. Salchipapas, mole, papusas, carne asada, and not a burrito in

sight. The highlight was the street food, overflowing the sidewalks with sugar-laden coffee, deep fried starches, and the unfathomably popular elote (aka cow corn).

It didn't take long, however, for the excitement to wear thin and the mundane reality to emerge: despite the dizzying array of new names to keep track of, the food basically breaks down into two categories:

starch and meat. And south of Mexico, where even salsas become scarce, they give up on flavor entirely.

Since my vegetarianism extends only to the US border, I at least got to spice up my starch products with the flesh of dead animals. Stephen took the high road and was subjected to a uniform parade of unseasoned rice, potatoes, eggs, and (with luck) beans. The concept of vegetables is completely foreign: I once looked around at a restaurant that served beet

salad with lunch only to see an untouched blob of pink on each plate. How silly of me! That must be garnish!

With this sort of diet, I'm hardly surprised I ended up constipated. The only question in my mind is how many pounds of petrified poop the average Latino is carrying around. It's like watching Olympic athletes; you understand it requires years of training, but it's still hard to believe your body could ever handle that



Cooking in a youth hostel in Bogota.

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PVF History — Continuing On, Changing Gears: Fifth in a 12-Part Series

by Hana Newcomb

Farming without Tony was hard to imagine. But Lani planted acres and acres of sweet corn, following the directions that her father gave her in one brief meeting when it became clear that he would not be planting corn that spring. She baled hay for mulch, loading many wagon loads by herself, she hauled and spread compost, she fixed broken machinery, and then she went back to veterinary school in September. Hana and Hiu managed the transplanting and mulching, the workers, the harvesting, the markets and the stand. Anna and Charles came home from Oberlin to work all summer. It was a season of amazing surpluses. The weather was great.

But the Newcombs did not do it alone – they had a crew of veteran workers and friends who were ready to do whatever needed doing. And the winter before he died, Tony had hired Paul Benton, a young man who seemed to have the skills and aptitude to be a farmer (actually, Tony observed that Paul owned a motorcycle, a car, an airplane and a pickup truck – clearly he had the right stuff). Tony met Paul working on the dock at Southern States, the farm cooperative that was the source for feed, fertilizer and other necessities. He thought Paul was squandering his talents there and convinced him to come and try out vegetable farming for a few years.

Hiu and Hana and Lani assured Paul that he still had a job – in



Jesse Bradford, son of Anna and Jim, playing with spilled spinach, circa 1986.

fact, he really could not leave now. Paul became the chief mechanic and did a much better job of maintaining and repairing equipment than Tony had ever managed. Paul could not stand the clutter that had accumulated over the years, so he insisted on a focused clean-up campaign. They made thirteen trips to the landfill in the dump truck in one year. The farm started to look better, but it took many years to tidy up.

In November of 1984, the Newcombs called a summit meeting, inviting about 20 old workers and friends to come for a weekend and help them think about what to do next. They had long, candid conversations about what needed to change at the farm (better housing, more equality and respect for all, better pay) and what needed to stay the same (most of it). The Newcombs listened to their community and prepared for another season.

In the spring of 1985, Hana and Jon got married in the Moutoux Barn, next door to the farm. They

didn't understand it at the time, but this was the beginning of the next generation of PVF farmers. Jon had moved to Virginia with no farm experience but he was willing to learn anything and everything and worked in the evenings after coming home from the office and through the weekends. Anna and Jim started a family and moved to the farm that summer. A new era began.

Between 1985 and 1992, six Newcomb grandchildren were born. Anna and Jim had three boys, Hana and Jon had one boy and two girls. From the beginning, these cousins were raised together. They changed the farm culture. The sixteen hour work day became a thing of the past. Babies needed attention, toddlers needed lunch, everyone needed naps. The era of the large groups of live-in workers in rustic housing gradually ended – no one had the time and energy to keep up with the needs of a community of 18 -22 year olds. The crew became a mix of

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year round residents and part time commuters (who could go home to a hot shower and a mosquito-free kitchen). A full time babysitter, Maria Camacho, joined the team and brought her family to live on the farm.

Meanwhile, there were vegetables to pick and sell, always. In the 1980s, farmers markets were reborn in the DC area. PVF was ready. Now there emerged a new routine of loading pickup trucks in the evening, ready to roll out in the early morning. Rain or shine, PVF went to market. Arlington on Saturdays, Takoma Park on Sundays. Fairfax on Wednesdays, Herndon on Thursdays, McLean on Fridays.

After three years of farming in somebody else’s shoes and fixing someone else’s old tractors, Paul was ready to farm on his own. He began to search for land. Hiu brilliantly suggested that he buy the Maryland farm from her, and he did. Paul moved to Southern Maryland with Martha Daughdrill (another PVF resident) and they got married and created Newburg Vegetable Farm.

The era of wholesale sweet corn had ended on its own as the old customers retired – and the fields were showing signs of wearing out after growing so much corn for so many years. Hiu suspected that Tony’s lymphoma was a direct result of his spraying herbicides and sold the corn sprayer. Now the farm only grew enough corn for the stand and the markets.

By the end of the 1980s the Vienna farm was ready

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level of stress.

Staying with a Colombian family really strained the limits of my culinary curiosity, trying to get excited to sample 14 variations of corn pancakes, each of which was presented as a completely different food group. When I could duck out for a meal, I’d stuff myself on the abundance of local fruit, but the leafy greens I craved were completely alien.

When I did get back to the farm I spent the first day gorging on vegetables and yogurt, a blissful

binge I undertook standing by the fridge. But I felt that eight months of constipation wouldn’t surrender so easily. So, with virtually no research and recommended only by gut feeling (sorry) I embarked on a four day Master Purge. Recently adopted as a starvation diet, this lemonade-based cleanse was originally intended to eliminate toxins from the body. Physically and mentally, I wanted a clean break from the oppressively heavy Latin cuisine so I could rejuvenate my digestive tract from a pure and

to be certified organic – no more chemical inputs, only compost and good soil management. The Loudoun farm was far from organic: still growing sweet corn using no-till methods, hiring Southern States to apply the herbicides. Loudoun was a corn and bean and hay farm, managed from afar. That was the horizon that needed the most attention now.



Hiu Newcomb with her grandson Stephen, circa 1988.

unsullied starting point.

Honestly, I had a terrific time in Central and South America, and I can’t even count the places I would be delighted to visit again. And as much as I complain now, I loved wandering between street vendors, tasting a variety of snacks that puts our hot-dog-and-peanut stands to shame. But I’m also thrilled to be back home, where we grill squash as well as steak and attending a barbeque won’t condemn me to suffering with jammed up personal plumbing for the next week.

What's in Casey's Picnic Basket?

Oven-Roasted Tomatoes

by Casey Gustowarow

It is the time of year we all look forward to as farmers and eaters: tomato season. There are so many quick, easy and delicious things to do with these wonderful fruits ranging from fresh salsa to a mozzarella, tomato and basil platter to just a simple tomato sandwich. However, if you are willing to spend a bit more time in your kitchen, you can discover exciting and intense tomato flavors by roasting or drying your tomatoes. Tomato season never lasts as long as we would like and if you are daunted by canning tomatoes, this might be an easier way to preserve the summer bounty.

Dried tomatoes are easy to make but take a bit of attention and time. The most consistent results come with a food dehydrator but you can also use your oven which I will explain. Roma tomatoes work best for this but you can also use other varieties. I recommend to do this in large batches (at least 5 pounds) since it will take quite a long time in the oven. With romas, cut them in half and scoop out the seeds. With larger varieties you can quarter them and remove the seeds and juice. Sprinkle the tomatoes with a bit of salt. If you have cake racks, these work best but you can also use cookie sheets. With a cookie sheet you will need to flip or stir the tomatoes to expose both sides to the heat. You may also need to move the racks in the oven periodically to ensure even heating. The oven should be

on its lowest setting (between 150 – 200 F). The tomatoes will take between 6 and 10 hours to dry and you will need to monitor the progress of your drying. When they are done, you want the tomatoes to be flexible, not brittle. They should not have a tacky feeling but instead be leathery. Let them cool and then place the dried tomatoes in an airtight container. They have a propensity to reabsorb moisture so it is best to make sure the container is airtight and store them in the fridge or freezer. One of my favorite things to do is pack them in olive oil and place it in the fridge. The oil will solidify in the fridge but will become liquid again once it reaches room temperature. You can snack on these sweet treats or throw them on pasta or salads.

Another option which does not take quite as long in the oven is making a roasted tomato paste. It is great on bread or added to tomato based sauces or soups. The paste can be frozen in jars or ice cube trays (for smaller portions).

You can use any variety of tomato for the paste. If the tomatoes are small like romas or cherries, cut them in half. If they are larger, quarter them. Place them in a bowl and drizzle with olive oil. Add some salt and pepper and toss everything so the tomatoes are coated. Place the tomatoes skin side down on a cookie pan lined with foil or parchment paper. Mince some garlic and sprinkle it on top of the tomatoes. Add some chopped herbs if you would like (oregano, rosemary, thyme all work great). Cook the tomatoes at 325 F for 1½ - 3 hours. The wide time range is a result of the many different types of tomatoes, however you want the tomatoes to be somewhat dried up, blackened around the edges but still soft. You can eat these delicious morsels as is or throw on some pasta but try to save some to put in your food processor or blender to make a paste. Add a bit more olive oil if you need more liquid.

