



Vol. 25 No. 4

July 14 - 18, 2024

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A Pleasant Place to Be

or, Land of the Lotus Eaters, or, Newcomers Beware, or, First Impressions

by Paul Huddleston

I have only ever had unglamorous jobs. The last three years of college, I was a line-cook. Since then, I have become a carpenter. And not a carpenter standing next to the architect-in-black, more like a carpenter so early in his career that he can't buy the help of internal combustion. Even in high school, I was a front desk attendant at a RECenter. I wouldn't call that job "unglamorous," but the boredom was so torturous that it must be called something very near to unglamorous. Despite all of my working experience, the lack of glamor on the farm is still shocking.

I'm assuming I know my audience. Except for the few other farmers that read this newsletter, you are a person who patronizes small, well-grown farms, but you are not a farmer. This leap may be too far,



Paul gets the fun jobs sometimes -- pulling onions is about as glamorous as it gets in July.

but I'll make it anyway, you may even have a romantic idea of what your beloved PVF is like. There's always a romance to the family farm. Food bursting out of every plant coupled with effervescent strawflowers and huge marigolds. The only walls in the fields are walls of sunflowers and jerusalem artichokes. At

six in the morning, the farm is almost mystical. With fog loitering above the fields and the noise of crunching gravel crowding the soundscape, you can't help but breathe and smile. The only blemish, if you can call it that, are a few stray weeds in and out of the rows of food. This is where the mysticism ends. For

you've now been tasked with removing these blemishes.

On my first day at PVF, Christian and I were told to weed the onions on the "Route 7" patch. He and I arrived at the patch and within thirty minutes, we were done. I remember saying something simple, I think it was "easy!" or "nice!" How unknowing. It wasn't until my second day that I was told to weed the onions in "parents." I was alone this time and went to the field looking for the onion beds. I drove around two or three times noting the beets, chard, sorrel, and cover crops. Knowing an efficient farmer wouldn't send me out on a joke, I looked further. I circled again and realized that the "cover crops" I kept passing were not cover crops but instead a sorely neglected bed of onions. I've come to learn this happens. Beds do, occasionally, get

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Recently Delicious

In his second season farming, Sebastian Muenchrath is celebrating the rhythms of the week and how they create a full season. Between the fields, the kitchens and the delivery routes, there's plenty of time to consider deliciousness. Interview condensed and edited for clarity. -Oscar Ruth

What is something delicious you enjoyed recently?

I made a salad at home which lit up my soul in a way that not a lot of food has recently. This fresh summer salad that really embraced the time of year we're in. It had bite-size pieces of tomato, cucumber, avocado, and peach salted ahead of time and then tossed with balsamic vinegar, olive oil, toasted sourdough and a whipped ricotta with honey. You never really know what's going to be on your fork for the next bite. So, one of the more simple things I've made recently, but I couldn't stop eating it, and I'm making it again tonight. I'll be making it until tomatoes are gone. It's light, refreshing, delicious; eating it is a feel-good experience. This dish opened my eyes to how I've changed my approach to cooking and feeding myself: it's so simple to throw it together, but the salt ahead of time, not something I would have done five years ago. The little steps make it that much more delicious and satisfying.

Are you an eat-out-of-the-salad-bowl kind of guy?

Everything I cook or prepare I am also making for my partner, Michelle. I like to do an enticing plating of the food because I know she's into that. And then I will just eat the rest out of the bowl. *laughs* She's always asking "why not plate up both?" and I'm like "I don't care what it looks like; I know the aesthetic experience brings you joy." I think that's a common thing with people who like cooking: they give themselves the seconds and try to put their best forward to others. I like that about the cooking community; the focus is on feeding others more than feeding yourself.

Could you describe your journey to Fireside Farm?

It took me a while to actually meet Stacey and Casey after I connected with them while I was working at Number 1 Sons in 2017-2018. I was managing the production of ferments, and I took on the project of doing one-season's worth of hot sauce. The idea behind that line of hot sauce was to partner with a DC-based brewery or distillery. I was also given the task of sourcing, which gave me an opportunity to focus on local produce. Casey, the hot-pepper wiz, answered my requests for 80 pounds of hot peppers. They told me later that it was a blessing and a



photo courtesy of oscar ruth

Sebastian and the Pickle Pizza.

challenge to fulfill those orders. A few years passed, our paths crossed now and again. When I landed in Brunswick, Maryland, I learned they had started Fireside Farm in Loudoun County. By then, I had decided to chase a change in my daily life and spend more energy focusing on tangible food instead of the periphery and broader food systems, and so I asked if I could work for them. They gave me a tour of the farm, and I asked if it would be possible to join the crew full time. It was a wonderful connection that helped me find work out here in this community.

Week-to-week is always different, but what does an average week look like for you?

The typical week for me is like this. Mondays I'm on the farm, helping harvest for wholesale for different DC restaurants. Tuesday at the farm doing different farm chores, keeping the wheels greased. Wednesday, I really enjoy taking the wholesale orders into the city, chatting with the chefs during the deliveries, and seeing the culinary energy coming out of those places. Those conversations help me see the produce with a different perspective whether it's praise or a "this isn't up to snuff" critique. I helped these plants become delicious ingredients, and I know the chefs are doing great things with them. On Thursday, when there's a pizza event in the next couple of days, I'm in the kitchen at the Corner Store in Waterford, working on prep stuff. It's quickly become my favorite day; picking stuff up from the farm, immediately working with it and the act of transformation is great. And then Friday or Saturday pizza nights have an energy and excitement all their own. Following the food through the cycle of a week, week after week, shifting through the

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seasons is incredibly fulfilling, very enjoyable.

Can you tell me more about the pizza with pickles and potato chips?

This was put on our radar by Tony, a local Wheatland community member, who has seemingly devoted much of his life to studying pizza. With pizza, every bite has dough, and with whole grain sourdough, you're really trying to balance that strong flavor with something acidic, something salty. Usually we're using pickles that Casey made in a previous season; he's always got an awesome backstock for something to throw on pies thanks to his tremendous efforts to not let anything go to waste and preserve everything. The ranch dressing that goes on the pizza is a little bit of a Sebastian creation. When people ask about the sauce, I consider keeping the recipe close to the chest but I don't. I tell 'em: pickle juice! Use as much pickle juice as you can! Empty your fridge of pickle juice and put it in this ranch, and then you too can make this pizza. And then the potato chips, which are pickle flavored, they just make

sense.

Are you experimenting with any pizza creations?

I am trying to manifest into this world a ramen pizza. I don't want you to think "soup pizza" - just borrowing some of those rich, fatty, salty flavors from ramen and applying them to pizza. So, a miso sauce, some char siu pork belly, some bright herbs, maybe some corn. I really get into a bowl of ramen and enjoy the indulgence.

What inspired you to get your custom license plate that reads



Sebastian on the farm.

EATLOCL?

I'm not one to preach or force my opinions on others, but I think this one is such a small change folks can do. Adding the intentionality, connecting with local farmers, doing it even a little bit can have a positive impact on the climate and the resilience of the local food economy. I also don't think it's a particularly controversial idea; folks who eat local are proud of that effort and folks who don't wish they did more. It feels like a friendly reminder in our agrarian area: there are a lot of farms, markets, farm stands, go check them out.

Are you dreaming or scheming anything delicious for the future

That ramen pizza, it can be a reality! This year, I'm trying to take full advantage of the seasonality around me. In the past, I've always gotten to the end of a certain part of the season and panicked that I didn't preserve it. Then I'm taking the end of season cucumbers or radishes and pickling them, which yes, gets me food for the winter, but it's not the best representation of it. So why wait until the beautiful pickling cucumbers are gone? Winter around here is hard enough, you might as well have the best cucumbers in the jar of pickles waiting in your cellar.

Bait

by Chip Planck

Bill: George Bramhall just caught three woodchucks.

I bet you can't guess how.

Me: I wouldn't dare. How?

Bill: Bubblegum.

Me: What?

Bill: Bubblegum

Me: No.

Bill: Yep

Me: How'd he do it?

Bill: Just threw it down the hole.

Me (playing along): With the wrapper off?

Bill: I don't know. But it was the good bubblegum, in the big packages. (Shows a 3-4" square with his fingers.)

Me: So how does he know they're dead, they're lying there legs in the air with bubblegum in their mouth?

Bill: I don't know. But he says he killed three. He lives in town here, you can't shoot or poison or do anything in town.

Bill, in conclusion: Now I've caught 18 with a Connabear trap... (and there follows a detailed explanation of setting those lures without catching your own hand. But this data is just typical technical filler; you can tell Bill is supremely pleased with his brand new bubblegum anecdote).

This account is from before Bill Moore died of a heart attack at age 63 on July 26, 2022.

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sorely neglected. And for those of us who have the misfortune of tending to this know that the undoing of this kind of neglect is incentive enough to never neglect again. And, onions are delicate. You can't rip weeds out the way you want to. So you have to get on your knees and waddle down the aisles with pious conviction. As you continue weeding, the first hour goes slowly. The second and third go not more quickly, but without so much fear of the task. It is at the strike of the fourth hour that you realize that it has only been 23 minutes. You look down the aisle and the farm turns into a David Lynch movie. The interminable onion bed makes you believe that by the time you reach the end, where you started will already have weeds again. Carrie or Hana come retrieve me to start a new task and I welcome them as a liberating force. This new task



Founding farmers Hiu Newcomb and Susan Planck (retired, Wheatland Vegetable Farms) at the annual blueberry picnic.



The blueberries were ready early this year (warm winter, warm spring) and we moved the picnic up a week so there would be plenty of blueberries to pick. Farmers and neighbors and cousins braved the heat yet again and kept the tradition going.

is usually more weeding but with the help of a weedwacker. And in that moment, the two-stroke motor is my salvation.

But maybe the next task isn't weeding. Perhaps it is mulching. I believe my first mulching task was the day Carrie liberated me from the onion beds. And on cue, the grumble of a front-end-loader appears with a boulder of straw on the front. Carrie deftly placed the wheel of straw at one end of the field where it would be rolled to the other end, mulching the path as it went along. But just as soon as she brought the straw, she left it. I couldn't help but notice that she had, indeed, not completed her task of rolling out the straw. Now Rachel and Christian, they started to cut the twine that was keeping the straw together. It was then that I realized Carrie and the front-end-loader were merely the courier service. We bipedal, non-diesel fueled humans would be the placers of this mulch. I think the word most fitting would be incredulous. Nevertheless,

the task was completed. As we approached the true end of the day, other tasks, mostly small but equally grueling, were also completed.

My day, and my week, were now over. I had two days of farm work behind me and convened at the farm stand to discuss my hours and ask questions about the upcoming jobs. As if everyone there had eaten lotuses, the jobs, hours, and task-lists looked all very similar to the week before. I suppose they had forgotten how difficult the tasks were. I guess I had joined in on the deliberate forgetting of the difficulty of these tasks because I promised my hours for the next week and bid them farewell. My mind and body were so exhausted that I was almost unable to think. Yet, as I walked towards my sun-baked car, with my sunburnt neck, drenched in sweat with an itch on my arm of unknown origins, I did have one thought: what a pleasant place to be and I'll see you next week, and the week after.