LOCAL HERO: FARMER/FARM

Deva Rajan and Moraga Gardens Farm

If you happen to find yourself at the corner of Moraga Road and Moraga Way (the center of Moraga), try to imagine how the land might have looked before the time of shopping malls. It’s not so hard to do, since many acres of the rolling hills surrounding you are still covered with remnants of the old walnut and pear groves that once extended far and wide over the landscape.

“A Catholic church here prunes the old trees, and the Contra Costa County Food Bank comes with boxes to harvest the fruits from those orchards,” says Deva Rajan, a weathered but fit-looking gentleman who manages Moraga Gardens Farm, a large community garden project at 1390 Moraga Way.

He points to the building at this address—a large warehouse with a funnel-shaped wooden extension that hangs over a driveway. “This was a walnut processing plant,” he says, as he explains that before the era of commercial walnut production, the land was part of the large Moraga Ranch, and the place where the community garden plots now stand was the location of a vegetable garden that produced food for the ranch workers.

It becomes clear that a good quantity of produce is still grown here, as Rajan rattles off a list of the 60 or so young trees he’s planted on the perimeter of the community gardens . . . “peaches, nectarines, plums, apples, apricots, pears, persimmons, cherries.”

In early spring, the Moraga Gardens Farm greenhouses are full of tiny tomato plants, “fifty-seven varieties. I got carried away this year,” Rajan admits. He describes how the participants, a big group representing diverse international backgrounds, will come together each night of the full moon in the warmer months for a garden party. The tomatoes will be sliced for comparative tastings and lots of them will go on pizzas that will be baked in the premises in the hand-built earthen oven.

A big difference between Moraga Gardens Farm and most other community garden projects is that, rather than tending separate plots, participants work the whole piece of land as a team, from plowing and sowing to tending and reaping. “We sell the top produce to restaurants [mostly in Oakland and Berkeley] and the income goes to pay for seeds, fertilizer, and rent on the property,” says Rajan. “After that everyone [the garden participants] takes all they want, and there’s still a lot left over that gets donated to the food banks and other charities. We make sure we don’t throw anything away,” says Rajan.

For more information, contact Moraga Gardens Farm Manager Deva Rajan at devarajan@earthlink.net

LOCAL HERO: RESTAURANT

Manzanita Restaurant

Here in the East Bay, we could easily hand over the Local Heroes restaurant category award to any one of several legendary establishments or rising star chefs who throw their whole-hearted support into the local, sustainable food movement. While we value and honor that incredible collective achievement, our small group of voters have chosen instead to acknowledge a little place on the Oakland/Emeryville border that serves as a gathering place for the vegan/macabiotic community. At Manzanita Restaurant, diners choose a “simple meal” of whole grains and veggies, or they order a larger or a smaller portion of the “menu of the day,” which is always some splendid combination of grains, legumes, and seasonal vegetables, adorned in several scrumptious sauces. Two of the many things we love about Manzanita (as if the wholesome foods and relaxed ambience were not enough) is that frequent diners can buy a meal ticket, and that the chefs offer monthly classes where we can learn how to make delicious food that is good for us as well as for the planet. At Manzanita, it’s not about how to have a pleasing night out, but how to nourish ourselves on a daily basis.

Manzanita Restaurant
4001 Linden St, Oakland/Emeryville
510.985.8386, manzanitarestaurant.com

Front row, left to right: Tienzen Tsonkey (chef), Pingcou Dorje (assistant chef and host), Ciren Zhouga (chef), Carla Faulkner (assistant chef and host), Laura Aleo (floor manager and host). Back row, left to right: Kalsong Dorje (assistant chef and server), Tashe Zhouga (server), Michael Bauce (chef), Aden Liggett (chef, manager).
Jason Harvey’s most powerful tool is the conversations he has with kids. After working in the Air Force and finishing his college education (a BA in history with a minor in holistic health) he came back to his hometown of East Oakland and started talking with teenagers about food. Jason rightly anticipated a disconnect in high-schoolers’ understanding of what is good to eat, where food comes from, and who produces it, as well as the diminished connection that results when families do not share food together at home.

His conversations caused him to wonder if the higher incidence of illness in his community may be caused, to some extent, by this disconnect: he estimates that six of every 10 kids he talks to have at least one close family member, often a parent, who suffers from diabetes or is battling cancer. Seeing and hearing about these difficulties brought him to remember his own experience of food insecurity and family loss while growing up.

“The problem is the cheap, consumer-based food system. Because of convenient food people think ‘why take the time to grow it, to cook it,’ but that approach to food lacks culture, lacks connection, and really importantly, lacks health. Food and its production are the glue that keeps us together, and people need to be close and connected to it. People need this connection, because without it communities, like East Oakland, experience deeper and more dangerous issues.”

In 2005, at the age of 25, Jason’s deep sense of purpose and energized commitment drove him to found the Oakland Food Connection (OFC), an organization that is taking on a range of projects, most of which are youth-based. Through OFC, Jason is connecting teenagers to the uplifting experiences of planting and tending a garden, engaging with shoppers and farmers at the farmers market, cooking healthy dishes, and sharing delicious meals with friends.

OFC programs regard youth as equal partners and encourage them to take on new skills and information as their own. Healthy eating and the ability to engage in the food system are skills that, for Jason, are paramount to the vitality of low-income communities. OFC aims to move their students beyond the historical injustices surrounding food. Through this effort, youth bring fresh ideas to their learning and eating and are eager to share with friends and family what they know about food, following it from seed to table.

Seed: Kids at E. C. Reems Charter School worked with Jason to build Oakland’s first rooftop school garden, and Unity Charter School students built an extensive garden program. Both schools incorporate the garden into curriculum and the delivery of healthy school lunches. The OFC youth team members have taken their skills out into the neighborhood to build gardens, increasing the yield of locally grown produce and connecting more residents to what they eat.

Table: Local youth serve as OFC’s only other staff, receiving a stipend and learning the ropes of nonprofit management. Interns work in the OFC space that is half filled with locally sourced organic dry goods, which they sell at the Laurel District Farmers Market (at a notably minimal mark-up from the wholesale cost). The market also has OFC teenagers cooking healthy, delicious meals using local, sustainably raised produce. The kids also cook for catered events and help with fundraisers.

OFC programs have the potential to improve the health and vitality of Oakland residents and to develop a range of economic opportunities for its youth. By facilitating a reconnection with food, OFC is poised to be involved with changes that go far beyond the dinner table, though the table, according to Jason, is the best place to start.

—Sage Dilts

Oakland Food Connection
4173 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland
510.482.1898
foodcommunityculture.org
LOCAL HERO: FOOD ARTISAN

June Taylor of June Taylor Company

Imagine a luscious marmalade made from lemon and myrtle, a conserve from nectarine and rose geranium, or a fruit butter from apple and ginger—these are some of the treasures that come out of June Taylor’s Still Room.

While June works at reviving the ancient, traditional methods of fruit preserving, she is also encouraging local growers to propagate and market rare heirloom fruit varieties, such as the Summer Sweet white peach, Elephant Heart plum, Rose Diamond nectarine, Rangpur lime, and Astrachan apple.

“I’m a conduit—a translator of someone’s grapefruit,” says June, as she describes how she uses the seeds and membranes to make her own pectin. Her passion extends into the art of confectionery as she candies citrus peel and into the use of floral and herbal infusions in her preserves to "reintroduce flavors that are more or less gone.”

“It’s about remembering—reconnecting,” she says.

Her production is done on the scale that someone would attempt in their home kitchen, and indeed, many home cooks come to the Still Room for June’s daylong workshops. The Still Room is a place of much inspiration.

June Taylor Company/The Still-Room
2207 4th St., Berkeley
510.548.2236, junetaylorjams.com

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LOCAL HERO: BEVERAGE ARTISAN

Jörg Rupf of St. George Spirits

Jörg Rupf and distiller Lance Winters at work in the hangar

While some things do get “lost in translation,” certain artisan products seem to gain when they relocate to a new locale. When Jörg Rupf brought his hand-crafted distilling equipment from Scotland to an old airplane hangar at the Alameda Naval Air Station, he began re-creating old-school recipes using locally grown ingredients. The results are St. George Spirits, whiskey, absinthe, and eau de vie, products of uncompromising quality, smitten with tradition but unabashedly American. Not content to stop with these, Rupf, along with fellow distiller Ansly Coale, created the wildly popular Hangar One vodka, now available in many flavor permutations. It’s no surprise that the St. George label is proudly served at some of the Bay Area’s most esteemed eateries and nightclubs. You can tour the distillery in Alameda to see and taste for yourself, and unload all your booze queries onto the guys who know the biz. Or, simply order a shot on the rocks at places like Zuni, Oliveto, Luka’s, or Slow Club.

—Serena Bartlett

St. George Spirits
2601 Monarch St., Alameda (old Naval Air Station)
510.769.1601, stgeorgespirits.com
LOCAL HERO: INNOVATOR

Amanda of Amanda’s Feel Good Fresh Food

We created this extra award especially for Amanda West of Amanda’s Feel Good Fresh Food for her part in helping reinvent the idea of fast food. “I think of it as slow food for fast people,” she says, as she keys in an order for a hormone- and antibiotic-free hamburger on an organic whole wheat bun with oven-baked sweet potato fries and an organic agave-sweetened cola.

West came up with the concept for a “sustainable” fast food restaurant in the summer of 2004 while interning at Niman Ranch’s headquarters in Alameda after her first year at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business. She had in mind to run a business with a social and environmental mission, but it was not until she read Eric Schlosser’s book Fast Food Nation and watched Super Size Me, the documentary film by Morgan Spurlock, that she realized how great the need was for healthy, environmentally conscious food options that would appeal to a majority of Americans.

“I got to do some ride-alongs on the Niman Ranch delivery trucks that summer. As we stopped at Chez Panisse and Whole Foods, I realized that this quality of food was not reaching many people, and definitely not reaching the people Schlosser writes about in Fast Food Nation,” said West.

She spent the next four years turning her vision of “Whole Foods meets In-N-Out Burger” into a reality. She researched her business plan extensively, rounded up investors, conducted a challenging search for the right location, and then called on nutritional experts and seasoned chefs to help design a healthy menu that would not sacrifice taste. Through it all, Amanda’s passion and enthusiasm drove the project.

In July of 2008, Amanda’s Feel Good Fresh Food opened for business on Shattuck Avenue just above the Downtown Berkeley BART stop. West’s focus on the health of her customers, the community, and the environment is visible throughout the restaurant. For example, everything Amanda’s sells is 100 percent compostable—the restaurant’s green garbage bins feed directly into Berkeley’s city composting program. The menu, which emphasizes fresh, seasonal ingredients, is also designed to help diners create 10 different meals that contain 600 calories or less.

As West had hoped, the restaurant draws a diverse mix of customers: construction workers, UC students, professionals, young families, security guards, Berkeley High students, and hippies all seem equally at home there. This mix is an encouraging sign given her hopes to expand the restaurant to other Bay Area locations in the near future.

Says West, “We want to bring this food and this sort of feel-good environment to lots more people.”

—Eve Fox

Amanda’s Feel Good Fresh Food
2122 Shattuck Ave, Berkeley
510.548.2122, amandas.com

LOCAL HERO: EDDY AWARD WINNER

Mary Tilson, local radio personality and regular contributor to Edible East Bay

Mary’s article “Cooking with Big Mind: How I survived Zen Cooking Boot Camp” published in our Spring 2008 issue, won the Edible Communities Best Editorial: Food or Cooking Focused award for 2008. Each year at our annual meeting of the 60+ Edible publications, Edible Communities Inc. hands out this and other awards for excellence. If you missed the article, you can read it here: edibleeastbay.com/content/pages/articles/spring08/cookingWith.pdf

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