TWO SMALL FARMS
Community Supported Agriculture
June 17, 18, 19 2009

After the Potato Rush, by Andy Griffin

It only took me a day to pan three flakes of gold out of the North Fork of the American River. It was fun to hear the splashing of the river and smell the pines and see the wild poppies and the lupines blooming on the riverbank. After a couple of hours my back hurt, my feet were wet and cold, and my eyes were sore from watching the flakes of fool's gold flicker in my pan, but it was fun to get away from the farm for a little while. I'd make a lousy gold miner. I probably would have made a mediocre miner even back in the days of '49 when nuggets paved the river bed and the sands were laced with gold dust. The funny thing is, had I been alive during the Gold Rush in California, I might have heaped up more money digging for potatoes than most miners ever got from digging for gold.

Most of the Forty Niners that swarmed into California during the Gold Rush were too dazzled by the prospect of striking quick riches in the Mother Lode to be bothered tending crops. In fact, many of the early miners were farmers who'd abandoned their fields in the United States at the news of gold and sailed for California and a new life. Once they were here, the miners traded what gold they found for staple foods like potatoes. Some miners were lucky, but most weren't. The smartest failures swallowed their pride and returned to farming. Here, in the virgin fields of California, farmers became alchemists, turning black, river bottom soils devoid of gold ore into money as hungry miners bought their produce and fed their bank accounts.

The potato was a perfect crop for the times–low tech, and high yielding. It's possible, especially along California's cool Central Coast, to dry-farm potatoes so that no effort need be applied towards irrigating the crop. In mid-winter, when the soil was softened and watered by winter rains, farmers plowed virgin ground that was rich in minerals and humus. The first seed potatoes were shipped to California from New England around the Horn. Once the potatoes arrived, they were cut into pieces, so that each piece had several "eyes" or buds. In a process called "chitting," the potato pieces were first rolled in wood ash, which acted as a primitive fungicide, and then set out in the sun to green up. When the fresh wounds from the slicing had scarred over, and the potatoes were starting to sprout sturdy little buds from the eyes, the potato pieces were ready to plant. The pieces of potato were then tucked into the soil in rows, each piece about a foot apart from the next. The soil acted as a blanket to insulate the sprouting potatoes from any late frosts. By the time the soils warmed up, the potatoes stems were breaking out into the sunlight.

If it is properly prepared and carefully handled, each piece of potato has enough water and energy contained in its tissue to shoot the first leaves and stems into the light. To control weeds and conserve the water that they would otherwise steal from the developing crop, the farmers tilled the soil around the potato plants. Besides cutting the weeds off at the roots so they couldn't rob the crop of water, potato farmers achieved two other goals with cultivation. When the soil on the surface is loosened and broken, the capillary structures that develop in the soil as water evaporates into the air are broken too, so evaporation slows and the subsoil remains moist under a so-called "dust mulch." As the potatoes grow and as the water table recedes under the longer days of spring, the plants follow the sub-soil moisture as it subsides down into the earth so that their roots reach the deep mineral soils. Rich flavors in vegetable crops and deep colors in cut flowers depend more on the presence of trace elements in the soil than on the high levels of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium that are available from commercial fertilizers.

Every time they cultivated the potato patch the farmers heaped soil up around the potato stems to keep the potato plants' roots cool, the way they like. The loose earth also provides a soft medium around the emergent stems for the potatoes to set in. Potatoes are engorged stems or tubers, not roots, and all the potatoes a potato sets will lie between the original seed or mother potato, and the surface of the soil. When the crop was harvested several months later, the farmers were rewarded for their efforts with mountains of potatoes; tough skinned for having not been overwatered or over fertilized, but delicious for having been grown in mineral- rich, soils. These dry-farmed potatoes stored well and were shipped from the coast to the mining districts in the Sierras where they fetched high prices.

From Interstate 80, above Auburn in the Gold country, it's easy to look east across the chasm of the American River toward the crest of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the distance. Even from miles away, it's easy to see the huge scars in the earth left from the Gold Rush. When the days of easy pickings were over, miners took to washing whole mountainsides away using hydraulic jets in their efforts to get at more diffuse gold deposits. The resulting flood of mud destroyed hundreds of thousands of acres of riparian habitat downstream and filled in huge areas of the San Pablo and San Francisco Bays. Luckily for us today, California's capital, Sacramento, was in the path of destruction. The devastation caused by the miners was so dramatic that the state's politicians were moved to enact some of America's first environmental legislation. Hydraulic mining was banned.

The farming practices that grew the potatoes that fed these miners were also extremely destructive. Being out of sight of Sacramento, the symptoms of "potato fever" were largely kept out of mind. Farmers are just people, and while some of them may have more practical and down to earth than the gold-grubbing miners they fed, they were no less beguiled by gold. Because potatoes were so salable, farmers kept planting them, over and over. When the soil in one field had been exhausted, when it had been mined of all its minerals and riches, the farmers

This Week

Salad Mix HG
Spinach HG
Red Torpedo Onions MF
Strawberries HG
Dill MF
Collards OR Chard MF
Mystery HG
Cucumbers *

Flowers: Mixed Bouquet TF

simply moved on to new lands and let the rains wash the exposed soil away. They planted no cover crops and counted on the earths' virginity to assure them of the soil's fertility. They were mining the planet as surely as any gold digger that ever lived.

To this day, if you drive along the San Mateo, Marin, and Sonoma coasts, it's easy to see eroded hills that mark where the potato farmers of the past despoiled the land. If you have access to Google Earth (free to download) click on 38 degrees 12'32.40" N, 122 degrees 55'47.23" W and the program will guide you to the northern end of Tomales Bay, north of Bolinas and Marshall, where Walker Creek empties into the Pacific. From space you can see the plume of mud flats that almost choke the bay off, left behind by the farmers over a hundred years after the potato rush. Guide your cursor inland a couple of miles up Walker Creek to 122 degrees 54'19.54" West to a point not far from the intersection of the Tomales Petaluma Rd and Highway One. In the old days, ocean going ships used to tie up at a pier here to load potatoes where cows now graze.

Less visible from space are the soil pathogens that contaminate the land. Because potatoes were planted over and over again on the same ground disease and insect pests became a problem for the potato industry. I have a farmer friend on the San Mateo coast that gets paid by the university from time to time to plant potatoes. The plant scientists are curious to see if their new potato varieties are resistant to the diseases that infect the soil. My friend uses no chemicals to help the crops survive the ambient pathogens, but he gets to sell any potatoes that survive. His niche is special but, due, in part, to diseased soils, potatoes are rarely planted as a commercial crop along the Central Coast these days.

On my farm I grow potatoes in much the same way as they were grown a hundred years ago, but I hope I've learned from the past. I limit the scale of my plantings so I always have fresh ground to plant into. Instead of letting the market tell me what varieties of potato may be the most popular with consumers I plant the kinds that experience has taught me are the most disease resistant. German Butterball potatoes seem almost fool-proof. I only plant an early crop so that the potatoes can do most of their growing in the cool months of early spring before the insects that spread disease have had a chance to recover from the killing frosts of winter and build up their numbers in force. It helps my bottom line if I can count on the rain to irrigate my crops too. Before and after each potato crop I plant a cover crop to rejuvenate the soil and I let the land rest for at least four years between potato crops. I'm not trying to strike it rich. If I end the season with a cooler full of potatoes to eat over the winter I'll feel wealthy. You can call my pile of yellow fleshed potatoes "fool's gold" if you want, but you can't eat bullion.

Recipes and Notes

(also see www.mariquita.com/recipes)

Spinach Torpedo Salad, from Jonathan Miller

When you have your oven on at 375˚–425˚ for something this week, try using a second, higher shelf for roasting your torpedo onions. They are fabulous this way. Slice them thickly; lay them out on a baking sheet (use parchment for easier cleaning), sprinkle with salt and pepper, olive oil, and a hit of sherry vinegar. Roast until brown and sweet (about 50 minutes). They will keep all week like this in the fridge. When you are ready to use your spinach, get a couple slices out and toss them with your spinach, some good feta or goat cheese and some quality olive oil and salt. Add your favorite nut for texture and protein. I also recommend the method in the Greens cookbook for wilting a spinach salad: heat your oil in a small skillet then pour it over your spinach while you toss it with tongs. It wilts the leaves just perfectly. Don't forget salt!

In-a-Pinch Cucumber Salad, from *Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone* by Deborah Madison

2 cucumbers or 1 long hothouse	salt and freshly milled white pepper
2–3 tsp. extra virgin olive oil	champagne vinegar or fresh lemon juice
1 tsp. chopped fresh dill, watercress, or parsley	

Unless you're using the hothouse variety, peel the cucumbers. Cut them in half lengthwise, scoop out the seeds, leaving a nicely shaped shell with smooth sides, and thinly slice. Toss the cucumbers with a few pinches salt, pepper to taste, and enough oil to coat lightly. Add a few drops vinegar and the herb of your choice. Serves 4.

Chocolate Dipped Strawberries, from Jonathan Miller

You can use any quality chocolate, melted. I like to make a little fudge dip that can also double as cake frosting.

6 oz unsweetened chocolate	1 cup plus 2TBS evaporated milk
1½ cup sugar	

Melt the chocolate. In a blender (you must use a blender for this—no food processors), blend the milk and the sugar for a few seconds. Add the chocolate while the blender is running and blend on high speed until the dip is thick and shiny, maybe a minute or so. The blender's sound will change as it is less and less able to blend the entire batch. Put the dip into a bowl and allow it to rest 30 minutes at room temperature. Cover with wrap or a lid and keep it at room temperature. Do not refrigerate. This will keep for several days.

Minestra of Swiss Chard and Rice, adapted from *Saved by Soup* by Judith Barrett

2 tsp. olive oil	1 med. sized onion, chopped
5 cups veg. or chicken broth	½ cup short grain rice
1 bunch chard or spinach, rinsed and roughly chopped	2 TBS fresh parmesan cheese, grated, optional
S & P to taste	

Heat oil in a heavy large saucepan over med-high heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring, until it begins to soften, 2–3 minutes. Add broth and bring to a boil. Stir in the rice, partially cover pan, reduce heat to med-low, and simmer, stirring occasionally to prevent the rice from sticking to the bottom, until the rice is tender, about 20 minutes. Stir in the chard or spinach, increase the heat to med-high, and cook until the greens are tender, 2–4 minutes longer. Season to taste with S & P. Ladle into bowls and serve with the grated cheese if desired.

Everything in your box and the flowers are organically grown. From Mariquita Farm: *torpedo onions, dill, collards, chard. From* High Ground*: strawberries, salad mix, spinach, mystery (cauliflower, potatoes, squash). From* Lakeside Organics: *cucumbers. From* Thomas Farm: *flowers.*