

Two Small Farms December Winter Newsletter

Issue Number 304 - Dec. 14th, 2004

Give the Gift of Vegetables

I know it's late in the game for those of you who celebrate Christmas, but if you would like to give 4, 9 or 36 weeks of vegetables for a gift during this holiday season call Julia at 831-761-3226, I'm in the office all week, and I'll return your call if I don't answer the phone that moment. I can send a gift certificate in the UPS mail or attach it to an email so you'll have something to wrap up.

Stimulating Bocadillo by Andy

One side will make you grow taller, the caterpillar told Alice as it crawled away from the mushroom, and the other side will make you grow shorter. So Alice, forgetting everything her mother ever told her about consorting with hookah smoking larvae or eating weird fungi in the woods, broke a piece of mushroom off in each hand and proceeded to nibble, first from the right, then from the left, shrinking and growing as she swallowed. I recently encountered a wild mushroom in the basement of the Savoy Hotel on Geary Street in downtown San Francisco. And like Alice, I ate. While I neither grew nor shrank the fungus altered my perception.

I had double parked on Geary at Jones to unload vegetable boxes from my truck onto my dolly. I wheeled my load through the Savoy's reception area, into the dining room of Millennium Restaurant, then bump, bump, bump down the service stairs to a pantry in the basement. As I entered the subterranean kitchen I saw Millennium's Chef, Eric Tucker, poised, with hands flat on a stainless steel table, considering an object in front of him, which appeared to be a large piece of brisket. Given that Millennium is a vegan restaurant this tableau was arresting.

What's that? I asked.

Eric took a long bladed knife and shaved three

slices off the mysterious slab. The color inside was exposed to be rosy like rare roast beef and marbled with white streaks. Eric laid the strips of flesh in the middle of a small, white, porcelain plate. He reached for a slender green bottle and trailed a thread of olive oil across the slices, then gave a quarter twist with a black pepper grinder from above. Beefsteak Mushroom, Eric said. Dig in.

I reached for piece and so did Eric. The texture of the mushroom was moist and velvety. The flavor was new to me but sparkled with a lemony tang. This is one of the few mushrooms that's best served raw, Eric told me. He had gotten the mushroom from his friend Rei de Funghi, the King of Mushrooms, who gathers wild mushrooms, buys and sells wild mushrooms from other foragers, and imports exotic mushrooms. I had met the King at Millennium on a previous occasion and had heard him tell of growing into the business by hunting for mushrooms with his Italian grandfather as a child. I drove away from the Savoy Hotel down wet, city streets, thinking that in another life I could've grown up to look for mushrooms.

The next day our fields were too wet to work in so I shut the farm down. The wildest mushrooms can't be on Geary Street, I told myself. I went to a bookstore, bought a field guide to fungi, and hit the trails.

I've farmed in Monterey, Santa Cruz, Santa Clara, and San Benito counties. I grew up in the hills behind Jamesburg on the road to Tassajara, and I've been to the tops of all our mountains. I thought I knew this country well. The citrus taste of mushroom beef lingered in my mind, odd but delicious, and entirely novel. There's a lot I've missed. With the hunt for mushrooms animating me I revisited familiar places for the first time in years. Instead of gazing off in the distance from Jack's Peak north to Loma Prieta or from looking south from Chew's Ridge to Cone Peak I found myself looking at the ground, even trying to see underground to where the webs of mycelium were preparing to thrust fruiting bodies to the soil surface.

My searching has been rewarded. I've found sulphur yellow Death Cap mushrooms still shrouded in tender membranes and curious white stemmed mushrooms that bruise blue upon picking. Everywhere I look I see things I never took time to notice before; tiny, white, umbrella shaped mushrooms and orange fungi all covered in slime. No, I haven't found any Beefsteak Mushrooms but that hasn't been the point of my search. I know enough about botany to know how little I know, and I intend to leave the business of hunting for edible mushrooms to the professionals. It's been rewarding enough to discover a new world underneath the one I thought I knew so well. As the result of a provocative taste of mushroom my body has stayed the same size but my world has gotten bigger.

Reading books on mushrooms has been a change from my normal diet of histories and seed catalogues. Mushrooms are agents of decomposition the guide books tell me, and they are mostly unseen. Spores grow into threads of mycelium that reach into dead wood and other organic matter breaking down carbon chains and releasing minerals. The mushroom we see is just the amorphous fungus organism's picturesque erection. What is small to the point of normally being invisible has grown in my sight. Isn't it a bit of a slight to call mushrooms de-composers? Even though they exist by breaking something down they do swell into the strangest, most lurid, graceful, poisonous and flavorful structures of their own. Maybe we ought to call mushroom re-composers. Nature's game is never really over, she just reshuffles the deck from time to time and mushrooms are one way she does it.

The fields have dried out and it's back to work tomorrow. The cover crops are sprouting and in the muddy soil beneath their roots the tomato vines from the season past are dissolving. As we go about our chores I'll watch the play of the cloud shadows on the green slopes of the Mt. Hamilton Range behind the farm to the north and I'll watch the fog spill over the Santa Cruz Mountains to the west but I've been inspired to

keep my eyes on the ground too, everywhere I go. Thank you, Eric, for a most stimulating bocadillo.

This article plus two mushroom photos

Winter Events

We have 2 farm dinners in San Francisco and a Winter Soup in a Cauldron Cooking Class with Jessica Prentice all coming up this winter. I have lots more details about each one. Andy and I will be at each event...

Winter Soup in a Cauldron Class Feb. 12th

4th Annual Radicchio Dinner at Globe Mon. Jan. 31st

First Ever Farm dinner at Desiree Café in the Presidio with famed chef Anne Gingrass Sat. Feb. 5th

Katie/Zelda Blurb from Jeanne

Goodbye and Thank You Katie

Our much-loved CSA administrator, Katie Peck, is leaving us after two wonderful seasons. We will miss her in many ways. Her great organizational skills, sense of humor, artistic abilities, and calm understanding helped ease us through many challenging moments during the CSA seasons. She kept things running smoothly here in the CSA office, giving Julia and Jeanne the time we needed to raise our children (who will miss her as well). We always felt comfortable having Katie talk to our members, because she so thoroughly understands and believes in what we are doing. But as much as we enjoyed having her handle our CSA logistics, we understand that it's time for her to move on. Thank you Katie, and we wish you the best of luck pursuing your career in environmental justice.

Welcome, Zelda!

As sad as we are to see Katie go, we are delighted to welcome our new administrator Zelda Stoltzfus on board. Zelda comes highly recommended from Eatwell Farm in Yolo County, whose CSA she managed last year. She also was a CSA farmer herself for four years in Indiana, where she helped launch an innovative CSA program tied into a weekly farmers' market. We're happy to be able to make such a smooth transition during the winter, and we are looking forward to tapping Zelda's wealth of experience in CSA farming and administration as we enter our 2005 CSA season.

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Our Contact Info

Two Small Farms
Mariquita Farm/High Ground Organics
831.786.0625
<http://www.twosmallfarms.com>
<http://www.mariquita.com>
<http://www.highgroundorganics.com>
PO Box 2065
Watsonville, CA 95077-2065