



Harmony Valley Farm

An update for our Community Supported Agriculture Members - Since 1993

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Exploring the Driftless Region

By Bobbie Harte

Although I have lived in Wisconsin my entire life, I only discovered the Driftless region about six years ago. I will never forget the first time I drove from Madison to Richland Center on Highway 14 and took that left turn towards Viroqua. Bluffs covered in snow and leafless trees rose up on either side of the winding road. I grew up in the rolling countryside of Wisconsin, but these tree-covered bluffs and stone outcroppings were new to me. I had no idea that my home state contained such a landscape.

While the majority of the Driftless region is in western Wisconsin, it also extends into parts of Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois. Why is it called "Driftless"? Retreating glaciers leave behind silt, clay, sand, gravel and boulders, which is generally called *drift*. During the last glacial period, which ended some 12,000 years ago, ice did not cover this area. It is *drift-less*.

During the last two million years, glaciers up to two miles thick sculpted about one-third of the earth's topography, creating North American landmarks such as the Great Lakes, Niagara Falls, the Kettle Moraine and the Ohio River. The Driftless was never an island surrounded by ice, but over the course of time different glacial lobes moved around it. The deep fold in the bedrock at Lake Superior (known as a syncline) siphoned ice from Canada to the southwest. Weak rock created lowlands that were easily scoured by glaciers, acting like a funnel to draw ice to the southeast. Structurally, Wisconsin is an arch from east to west, with friction of rocks causing resistance to northern glacial advancement. All of these factors played a part in drawing ice away from the Driftless region, preserving this ancient landscape of sandstone bluffs and deeply-carved river valleys; of sinkholes and cave systems; of underground rivers and above-ground springs; of rock shelters and effigy mounds; of Ice Age relict animal and plant communities like snails, rattlesnakes and Northern Blue Monkshood; of alfic talus slopes and goat prairies.

Last month I had the great privilege to meet Harmony Valley Farm's neighbor, Jim Theler, a retired archeologist who has spent much of his career researching land snails and effigy mound cultures in the Midwest. It was a sweltering July day, but Jim gamely took me on a tour of a goat prairie on his property. The phrase "goat prairie" refers to the steep topography (you have to be part mountain

This Week's Box

ITALIAN GARLIC: Make garlic smashed potatoes with the new potatoes in the box. Roast garlic and add to boiled new potatoes. Finish with a little cream and butter and gently smash the potatoes and garlic. Remember to leave the skin on the tender new potatoes!

SWEET ONIONS: Top off a nice grilled hamburger patty with a thick slice of onion either raw or place the slice of onion on the grill and let it caramelize.

BROCCOLI OR SUMMER SQUASH: Need a salad idea for your cookout or picnic? Check out the recipe for "My Husband's Broccoli-Nut Salad" from *food52.com*. Summer squash, whether zucchini or scallopini, can be well-used in the Chocolate Chip Zucchini Cake recipe available on *epicurious.com*.

CUCUMBERS: Combine diced cucumber, diced tomato, diced onion and some fresh herbs with cooked quinoa. Mix a ½ cup of olive oil, ¼ cup of red wine vinegar, a squeeze of lemon juice, salt and pepper to taste and top with crumbled feta. Serve at room temperature or chilled.

CARROTS: Carrots are sweet and delicious when caramelized. Slice the carrots and steam, then sauté with butter and sliced onion until caramelized, season with salt and pepper to taste.

GREEN BEANS: Green beans and bacon, nothing more to say! Blanch beans for 1-2 minutes. Cook a few slices of bacon until crisp and reserve drippings. Add beans to drippings, season with red pepper flakes, minced garlic and diced onion. When serving add crumbled bacon. For a unique side, cut eggplant into strips, bread and fry.

NEW POTATOES: Try creaming your new potatoes. Quarter potatoes and par-boil them. Make a simple white sauce and pour over the potatoes, season with salt and pepper.

SWEET CORN: See this week's newsletter for more information and recipe ideas.

RED GRAPE TOMATOES: If you don't eat them all fresh, try pairing with basil, balsamic vinegar and feta cheese to make a quick salad or salsa to top off grilled chicken or steak.

MIXED VARIETY OF TOMATOES: Make a few extra slices of bacon at breakfast (be sure to hide them in the fridge) and a quick BLT can be on the lunch menu.

GREEN BELL PEPPERS: Green peppers are great grilled on a skewer with tomatoes, onions and zucchini. Cut vegetables into chunks, skewer and brush with oil. Grill along with your choice of meat.

JALAPEÑO PEPPERS: Time to make a simple batch of Pico de Gallo! Don't forget these are hot...handle with care!

SWEET SARAH OR SUN JEWEL OR FRENCH ORANGE MELON: Sweet Sarah is a cantaloupe with a netted rind, no ridges. The flesh is smooth, orange and flavorful. It has a nice balance of sweetness without too much "muskiess." Sun Jewel melons have a bright yellow rind with white stripes and ridges. The flesh is white, crisp and sweet. French orange melons are just starting to ripen. They are a small, fragrant cantaloupe. All are delicious sliced into wedges and eaten or cut them up and add to a fruit salad.

CHOICE-SWEET ITALIAN BASIL: Add basil to fresh corn salad or salsa for a summer kick!

goat to manage it!) but they are also called hill prairies and dry prairies. Now these slopes are mostly choked with trees and underbrush, but before European settlement, the south and southwestern slope faces looked like Jim's goat prairie, which was an oak savannah: a combination of shortgrass prairie and fire-resistant trees like bur oak, white oak and cottonwood. Whether ignited accidentally by lightning or purposefully by Native Americans, fire played an important role in maintaining these diverse landscapes of deep-rooted grasses, forbs and shrubs. Prairie fires clean out dead plant material and expose the soil to the warmth of the sun, encouraging new growth. The arrival of Europeans and their fear of fire led to the

densely-wooded landscape we see today.

Goat prairies have sparked my curiosity in two main ways. First, the plants themselves are fascinating. With the help of a specialist from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Jim has identified more than 250 native plant species on his property alone, and each one has a story. Take Leadplant, for example. This native woody shrub can live for centuries, although it never grows past a height of three feet. Leadplant is also sometimes called Prairie Shoestring because of its large and complex root system, which grows as far as ten feet deep. Deep roots make this and other native plants uniquely suited to such rocky terrain. They are able to withstand dry summers,

prevent erosion and maintain the fertility of the soil.

The second way goat prairies have sparked my curiosity has to do with the effect that human habitation has had on the landscape. In 2003, Gerald W. Williams wrote a paper for the USDA Forest Service entitled "References on the American Indian Use of Fire in Ecosystems." Williams writes that American Indians modified the ecosystem, largely through the use of fire and for a variety of reasons: to make hunting easier; to improve grass grazing for deer, elk, antelope and bison; to deprive enemies of hiding places; to improve the fertility of the soil; and pest management. This is a topic I would like to explore further. I suspect we can learn much from the practices of past human cultures and use them as an example for our own interactions with the landscape.

Partly to catch our breath and partly to appreciate the view, Jim and I paused at the top of the goat prairie, looking over the distance to other bluffs and other valleys. I tried to comprehend it all: the variety of animal and plant life around me; roots plunging six, ten, fifteen feet into the earth; the course of the twisting Bad Axe River. I tried to comprehend living as a hunter-gatherer who built effigy mounds in the shapes of bears or birds. I tried to comprehend a different sense of time, one not based on hours or days or even a human lifespan, but encompassing thousands and millions of years.

Vegetable Feature: Sweet Corn

There's always some excitement around sweet corn, after all it is a classic summer vegetable loved by most! Farmer Richard enjoys the challenge of growing "the best" sweet corn, a delicate balance between choosing a variety with good genetics, one that will perform under challenging field conditions, and one with good corn flavor and just the right balance of sweetness and tenderness. No small task!

There are many varieties of sweet corn, but not all are created equally. First, we do not grow any GMO sweet corn. We opt to use organic or untreated seed and rely on newer "sugar-enhanced" bi-color hybrids, many of which are recommended to us by our knowledgeable seed rep. These varieties start sweet and have tender kernels. Early in the season we look for a variety with the ability to germinate in cold soil. We do what we can to help it along by planting the seed fairly shallow on a sunny day. The first 24 hours are critical to success so we rely on the heat of the sun to warm the soil. This tactic, in Farmer Richard's words, gives the seed the "kiss of life" and just enough heat and encouragement to germinate the seed. The other tricky part of choosing an early season variety is that most varieties we have tried don't taste that great. We're happy to have found two delicious varieties this year, Sweetness & Nirvana.

It's important to keep sweet corn cold. After the corn is picked, sugars will start to convert to starch. Keeping corn cold will slow this process down, preserve the quality and sweetness and give you a few more days to enjoy it. Another reason we plant the sugar-enhanced varieties is because they have a slower rate of conversion of sugars to starch. Despite the fact that you see people selling and transporting corn out of the back of a pickup truck, this is not the best tactic. We take ice to the field when we harvest it, ice it again when it comes in and store it in the cooler until we pack it and load it on a refrigerated truck. We do what we can to grow the tastiest corn for you, but you need to do your part too! Take a cooler with you when you pick up your box, store it in the refrigerator and eat it within a few days.

While eating it off the cob is a special summer treat, fresh corn can be enjoyed in so many other ways. Cut it off the cob and add it to summer vegetable salads, salsas or relishes. Stir fresh corn kernels into cornbread batter, make fritters or try the recipe for sweet corn pancakes. It's also good in summer vegetable chowders and light soups. If you cut the corn off the cob, don't discard the cob. Add it to soups or stock where it will impart a delicious corn flavor.

Sweet Corn Pancakes

Yield: 16-silver dollar size pancakes

- ½ cup yellow cornmeal
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp sugar
- ½ tsp baking powder
- ¼ tsp salt
- 2 oz sharp cheddar cheese, grated
- 1 egg, beaten
- ½ cup buttermilk
- 1 cup fresh corn kernels
- 2 Tbsp minced onion
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 Tbsp finely chopped jalapeño, optional
- 2 Tbsp finely chopped fresh herbs (oregano, basil, parsley, thyme, etc)
- Vegetable oil, as needed

1. In a small mixing bowl, combine cornmeal, flour, sugar, baking powder and salt. Add grated cheese and mix just enough to coat the cheese with the flour mixture.
2. In a medium mixing bowl, whisk together the egg and buttermilk until well combined. Stir in the cornmeal mixture along with the corn, onion, garlic, jalapeño (if using) and fresh herbs. Stir just until all the ingredients are mixed well.
3. Heat a cast iron skillet over medium heat. Add just enough vegetable oil to lightly coat the pan. Drop the pancake batter in small spoonfuls into the hot skillet. Cook for about 2 minutes or until the underside is golden brown. Using a spatula, flip the pancakes and cook on the other side until it is golden brown. Remove the pancakes from the pan and hold them in a warm place until you finish making the remainder of the pancakes.
4. Serve warm as a side dish or as the main part of a meal. They are delicious for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Serve with a dollop of sour cream or fresh salsa if desired.

Recipe by Andrea Yoder.

Charred Corn Salad with Mint, Parsley and Cilantro

Yield: 4 servings

- 4 large ears of corn, shucked
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and freshly ground pepper
- ½ small onion, thinly sliced
- 2 ½ Tbsp fresh lime juice
- 1 tsp pure maple syrup
- 1 jalapeño, seeded and thinly sliced
- 3 Tbsp torn mint leaves
- 3 Tbsp torn parsley leaves
- 3 Tbsp torn cilantro leaves

1. Heat a large grill pan or an outside grill. Brush the corn with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Grill over moderately high heat, turning, until crisp-tender, about 12 minutes. Let cool.
2. Meanwhile, in a small bowl, combine the onion and lime juice and let stand for 10 minutes. Stir in the syrup, jalapeño and 2 Tbsp of olive oil and season with salt and pepper.
3. Working in a large bowl, cut the kernels off the cobs in sections. Add the onion dressing and toss. Add the mint, parsley and cilantro and toss again. Serve warm.

This recipe is the creation of Chef Yotam Ottolenghi. It was featured in the September 2012 issue of *Food and Wine* magazine.