



SHARE, HALF-SHARE





Share, Half-Share has been an exciting opportunity for painter Kyle Ragsdale, photographer Paul Baumgarten and writers John Beeler, Tyler Henderson and Cindy Ragsdale to take a closer look at some of the ways that we, as Hoosiers, relate to food -- in memories evoked, how our food is grown and ways that we share. We thank the Indiana Humanities Council Food for Thought program which engages Hoosiers in discussions about food and how it helps define Indiana's culture, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for making this project possible.

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Persimmon

If your grandmother grew up here in Indiana, she probably has a recipe card tucked away somewhere entitled “Persimmon Pudding,” the directions of which she may have copied down while watching her grandmother. In Indiana, persimmons are synonymous with fall and Thanksgiving and Christmas and families and tables. Hoosiers have taken to this underrated and underused fruit and made it our own.

Persimmons are grown all over the United States. The popular *Diospyros kaki*, a variety imported from China in the late 19th century is cultivated very successfully in the warmer climates of the South and the West Coast. It is sweeter, brighter, and heavier than Hoosier varieties, derived from the *Diospyros virginiana*, itself discovered by John Smith and the earliest European colonists in Virginia. *Virginiana* are huskier and smaller, their taste more subtle. You can pluck a *kaki* from a tree and eat it raw . . . our varieties, not so much. Here you have to wait until they fall from the tree (but not too long; more than a day or two at most and the persimmon ferments and rots). Its understated flavor and extremely high sugar content respond best to the tease of a slow oven bake. But it’s worth it. When pulled from the oven, it smells kind of like heaven might.

We Hoosiers didn’t always appreciate the persimmon. In fact, early settlers here were not fond of the fruit. Persimmons grew wild and prolifically in Southern Indiana, but when they fell from the tree and rotted, it stank something awful. If left the smell would draw possums from miles around. Landowners would instead beg neighboring farmers to bring over their hog stock and set the animals loose. It was probably one of the pigs’ happiest days of the year. We didn’t know what we were giving away.

Native Americans did. By the time Europeans landed on the continent, they had long mastered the art of baking and eating persimmons (they called them “*piakimina*”). Because persimmons grew wild and were quick to reseed, they never needed cultivation or supervised farming. You just had to be in the right place at the right time. In addition to preserving persimmons a la prunes and using the crushed seeds to prevent dysentery, Natives gifted *piakimina* bread to early American explorers and settlers. They baked *piakimina* cornbread. And they brewed *piakimina* beer.

Poor tenant farmers and African American slaves, living on plantations in the South, learned to use persimmons too. Especially popular was their own brew of persimmon

beer, called “Possum Toddy” by Confederate soldiers (who themselves used ground persimmon seeds as a coffee substitute in tough times). The beer was a hearty, powerful alcoholic beverage imbibed with wheat and occasionally honey locusts.

Though it was among Natives, poor Southern whites, and blacks that persimmons probably became a staple luxury, wars have a way of splicing and transplanting culture. The Civil War was no exception and it was likely then that middle-class Hoosiers began using persimmons as something other than pig fodder. In fact, one variety of Indiana persimmon owes its origins to a certain Mr. Gillet, a Union soldier stationed on picket duty in Kentucky. Upon seeing a remarkably endowed persimmon tree, he took its seeds and sent them home, where his family passed them around town and the variety now grows heartily. And though Persimmon Pudding likely started in North Carolina, it was Hoosiers that really perfected it and kept it. And this is the way the persimmon has survived and thrived in Indiana and comes to our ovens today; through families and friends and traditions and sharing.

John Beeler







An Accidental Farmer

I am a farmer. I have had other jobs too. In my professional career, I also coordinated study abroad programs in Australia and New Zealand; directed an international programming unit of a law school; completed a master's degree in Education Policy jointly taught between universities in Norway, Finland and Portugal; and even today recruit for an MBA program at an Italian business school. (I travel four months each year to about 20 different countries.)

This career development has been filled with intrigue and adventure, learning and developing. No vocational title, however, has provided me with any more satisfaction than that of "farmer." I chose farming. I do not come from a family of farmers, or a farming community. I come from a family of white-collar, traditional, middle-class workers. My years living and studying in Europe got me thinking about the role of food in a family, community, and society, and how my supermarket, fast-food upbringing did not expose me to the pleasures of a slow meal, savored with friends, the origins of the ingredients expressly known. My graduate school education was designed to give me an understanding of the ever-changing role of higher education institutions in society. Instead of focusing on these readings and research, I constantly found books in my hands with author names like Wendell Berry, Michael Pollan, Carlo Petrini, Barbara Kingsolver, Eliot Coleman and Joan Dye Gussow . . . all writers on food, farming, and agriculture. So, farming was beginning to find me.

It was not until Laura (my wife) and I moved back to Indianapolis that I began to think about growing food. We built a small backyard garden and experimented with growing as much food as possible in 200

square feet. In short order, I realized that I found myself in a city where access to land is relatively easy and virtually free, and where an emerging and passionate consumer base was beginning to demand better food. By sheer coincidence, another young accidental farmer (Matthew Jose) was trying to build up an urban farm at just that time and created Big City Farms. Within weeks of the development of Big City Farms, I knew I had to get involved. Not as a volunteer, not as an employee, but as a co-farmer and co-owner.

Matthew and I talked at length about the reality of wanting to farm and also wanting the amenities of a city (getting around by bicycle, enjoying coffee shops, living in the same neighborhood as friends). Less than one year ago, I took the plunge into being a farmer, and what a wonderfully enlightening journey it has been already. My farming and my international travel have convinced me that our food future is based in our largest population centers. The world's population is moving to larger and larger cities and continues to have an insatiable appetite for food that is nurturing to the body and nurturing to the earth. I can see not too far out in the distance, the day when adults reflect on their childhood days on family farms in downtown Indianapolis, Detroit, St. Louis, Seattle, and Houston.

What is certain is that farming is really tough. I would not have it any other way. My first year of farming has been full of big and small battles both won and lost. The wins of starting the first onion seeds in February, planting the first spinach in March, building sturdy trellises in April, watching the crops take off in May, starting vegetable distribution in June, getting a bumper crop of tomatoes in July, and the magic of digging the first potatoes in August. The losses of sleep, crops

to bindweed, and the anguish of hoping for rain during the driest August on record. But these tangible wins and losses are lessons that will be applied to next year, and the year after, until the wins get bigger and more satisfying and the losses get smaller and more humorous.

When I travel the globe looking for MBA talent, I enjoy the interactions, the scenery, and the absolute privilege of experiencing and trying to understand the wildly diverse people and cultures to which I am exposed. However, when my mind starts to wander (which it does often) over a great meal in Shanghai, Frankfurt, or Milan, I find that I think back to our little Big City Farm and those wonderful little vegetables. How insignificant they seem from afar. But when viewed up close, we see the significance of the people they are feeding, the soil they are nurturing, and the city they are impacting. This is quite a task for those spicy little radishes, those elegant fresh beans, those robust red cabbages, and those teeth-numbingly sweet cherry tomatoes. But they can do it . . . they have been doing it for centuries. And we can do it too. We need good food, real food, food that repairs the environment, that brings friends and family together, food that defines us and makes us proud as eaters and as growers. If I became a farmer, anyone can become a farmer. And this city, rather, all cities, are ready for a few more accidental farmers, a few more accidental farmers just like me.

Tyler Henderson







Slow-Food-Full-Share

The Fountain Square Supper Club (FSSC) is a group that rotates among 8 to 10 households within a few Fountain Square blocks to dine together each Sunday evening. The group was begun by our neighbor, Tonya Beeler, in September, 2006, and we have gathered weekly with nary a miss besides holidays. The host and/or hostess on each given Sunday prepares the meal for all, which means that prep day only comes up once every couple of months for each of us. So the interim 8 or 9 weeks feel carefree. And the whole endeavor feels . . . unique . . . slowing down to create a little temporary, mobile commune in the midst of personal propulsions through busy individual lives. We stop and see one another. We “fill up” before propelling selves in a few dozen Monday-morning directions. “Hank,” a fictionalized composite of the 15 to 20 children present at these dinners, predicts the future impact of the ritual on our present-day smallest participants . . .

From Sunday nights of my childhood, I will remember a distinct shift away from our normal mode of family operation, when, no matter what, happy or crabby, we go to dinner with lots of friends, each week at a different home and now and then at our house. I will remember the noisy talk of grown-ups above me (as I hang out with the same faces of the same kids on a different surface each week — hardwood / vinyl tile / area rug / wall-to-wall carpet / crabgrass / wooden deck / sidewalk /

cement stoop). I will remember closed loops of adult conversations, reopening again and again to accommodate the next comment (sweet or rude or sarcastic or sentimental or harsh and clear or jokey or clever or honest or despaired or vapid or profound . . . the next and the next datum of face-to-face shared life). I will not know what it all meant, but I will remember that it matters to them enough to bring us here perpetually, Sunday to Sunday. And I will remember that they bend down to talk with me too.

It’s so strange. I am 6 years old. I don’t like to experiment much, but something shifts within me too on Sunday nights. If you put a plate in front of me in this semi-sacred space — persimmon pie or jello mold or roasted goat or homemade tapioca — in the safety of this twilight and glee — mosquitoes and garden sprinklers or snowboots and runny noses — I’ll do it. I will. In the strange slowness of this human hum, I will try anything. I am open to life in this moment. Now, I may never again try *another* persimmon pie . . . or jello mold . . . or roasted goat . . . or homemade tapioca . . . but I will remember this hour. I will remember the *slow* of witnessing the night fold in on us, three-dimensional and real, and I will remember being *full*.

—by “Hank,” as told to the imagination
of Old Lady Ragsdale



This program has been made possible in part by support from the Indiana Humanities Council in cooperation with the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the Indiana Humanities Council.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT



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