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Celebrating Central Texas food culture, season by season

Cooking with Peaches · Feeding Baby

Edible Business: What's on the Table · Biodiversity

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VANISHING ACT

BY VALERIE BROUSSARD

To qualify for the US Ark of Taste, food products must be:

- Outstanding in terms of taste—as defined in the context of local traditions and uses
- At risk biologically or as culinary traditions
- Sustainably produced
- Culturally or historically linked to a specific region, locality, ethnicity or traditional production practice
- Produced in limited quantities, by farms or by small-scale processing companies

> "Monoculture is at the root of virtually every problem that bedevils the modern farmer."
> —Michael Pollan

Heritage foods—the plants and animals that once sustained our ancestors before the food supply became industrialized and commercialized—are invaluable markers of time; windows into a particular environment, culture and history. Yet according to the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, 300,000 vegetable varieties have become extinct in the last century, and one more is lost every six hours. Furthermore, 33 percent of native cattle, sheep and pig breeds have disappeared forever, or are close to disappearing. What's causing these treasures to be lost at such an alarming rate? The destructive move away from biodiversity.

Our current trend of monoculture—the cultivation of a single plant species, often on a large industrial scale—not only threatens the environment but the well-being of the people dependent upon those limited crops. The Irish potato famine is a dramatic example of how a lack of genetic diversity (combined with a tumultuous political climate and social hierarchy) can cause devastation. When a disease attacks a single crop, as it did in 1840s Ireland, the entire crop is wiped out and people are left with nothing. Similarly, an infestation, drought, freeze or other extreme climatic condition can decimate a lone crop in one fell swoop. In his book *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World*, Michael Pollan writes that, "A vast field of identical plants will always be exquisitely vulnerable to insects, weed and disease—to all the vicissitudes of nature. Monoculture is at the root of virtually every problem that bedevils the modern farmer." Shockingly, the USDA predicts that the acreage of corn planted in the U.S. will increase to 90 million by 2018.

Another culprit threatening biodiversity is the commercial animal industry. Many species are bred to grow quickly, with high yields, rather than for nutritional value and culinary properties. The ubiquitous Cornish Cross chicken, a fast-growing chicken hybrid raised for its meat, is bland in comparison to other breeds and gains weight so quickly that it exceeds its skeletal capacity, and has

(Opposite page) Photography of an A + S Delaware heritage breed chicken by Shaun Jones

Fish Pepper transplants, Johnson's Backyard Garden

"Freckles" speckled lettuce and Cherokee Purples, Boggy Creek Farm

Miotonic goat, Persimmon Grove Clark Farm and Heritage garlic, Tecolote Farm

trouble walking. All major industrial chicken companies, including Tyson Foods and Perdue Farms, raise the Cornish Cross, and it is estimated that the U.S. produces a total of eight billion broilers each year. Tyson, the world's largest chicken producer, alone processes 42.5 million broilers a week. Erin Flynn of Green Gate Farms attributes this practice of breeding for unnatural growth rate to the "impatience of the meat industry," and adds that "heritage breeds are more natural, more in harmony with their biology."

As we continue to lose our heritage and native plants and animal breeds to these commercial trends, we lose the very roadmap to our culinary history. Seeking out, saving and preserving these unique species is paramount to our legacy—consider decisions about food as an act of conservation.

"You can't save the whales by eating whales," writes Barbara Kingsolver in her popular food manifesto *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle.* "But paradoxically, you can help save rare, domesticated foods by eating them." Create a demand and farmers will grow rare varieties and ranchers will raise rare breeds.

Organizations like Renewing America's Food Traditions (RAFT) and the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC) are helping to preserve our heritage and native plants and animals. And the Ark of Taste—a national project of the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity—"aims to rediscover, catalog, describe and publicize forgotten flavors" and "gastronomic products that are threatened by industrial standardization, hygiene laws, the regulations of large-scale distribution and environmental damage."

Closer to home, several Central Texas farmers have dedicated space and time to heritage plants and breeds with great success.

Gulf Coast sheep, A + S in Praha, Texas

(Clockwise from left) Photography of intern Margaret Wittenmyer by Carrie Kenny; heritage lettuce and tomatoes by Carol Ann Sayle; drying garlic by Katie Kraemer; lamb by Shaun Jones

Brenton Johnson of Johnson's Backyard Garden not only grows a huge selection of Ark of Taste vegetables, but also has transplants regularly available. Johnny and Jeanette Yates of The Farm at Harl's Creek raise several breeds of cattle, including the only Hereford herd in the U.S., which also comes from one of the oldest lines of the breed. They also raise Devons (on the ALBC's Recovering list) for beef, Red Polls (on the ALBC's Threatened list) and Milking Shorthorns (on the ALBC's Critical list).

Amy and Shaun Jones of A + S in Praha, Texas have had good luck raising Gulf Coast sheep (listed on ALBC's Critical list as well as with the Ark of Taste)—a hearty breed that does well in drought conditions and eats weeds that other sheep or cattle won't touch. The breed is also highly disease- and parasite-resistant, both excellent qualities for our rough Texas climate.

Of course many farmers agree that special challenges and considerations are involved with producing these lesser-known plant and animal species. Justin Clark of Persimmon Grove Clark Farm in Waco raises Tennessee Myotonic goats commercially, and a few heritage breed chickens, turkeys and ducks. His animals are pastured, as opposed to the confined living conditions of large commercial operations, and as a result, he says, the trade off is that the meat is a little tougher. "Commercially, chickens are bred to have genetics to get them up to size and ready to slaughter as fast as possible. Since they have a short life and often times less muscle movement, this makes the meat more tender than what we can produce on the farm." Slow-grown meat requires a little more care and time: brining, marinating, long, low-temperature cooking. The result is a rich, flavorful and yes, eventually tender meat.

And some heritage breeds don't reproduce easily. For example, Cotton Patch geese lay eggs only in the spring and are so close to extinction that Tom Walker of Bastrop raises them exclusively for breeding stock instead of meat.

Brad Stufflebeam of Home Sweet Farm points out that heirloom plants don't have as much disease resistance as hybridized varieties. And Jo Dyer of Angel Valley Farm says they try to grow heirlooms when they can, but only after a trial of just a few plants to see if they can handle the soil and the extremes of the Central Texas climate. Some farmers estimate that it can take up to three generations for a species to adapt to, and thrive in, our climate. Some varieties flourish, while others struggle.

Lund Produce's Kevin Lundgren, whose family has lived in Elgin for over 100 years, likes to experiment with heirloom varieties, too. And like Jo, he must plant trials to determine viability. His greatest success has been with a red shallot given to him years ago by an elderly German woman who grew it in her garden. Her mother had brought the original with her in the late 1800s when she immigrated to America. Lundgren grows a laundry list of heirlooms including Green Zebra, Prudens Purple, Pineapple, Marianna's Peace, Black Krim and Aunt Ruby's Green tomatoes; Jenny Lind, Black Diamond, Jubilee and Tom Watson melons; Bloody Butcher, Country Gentleman and Golden Bantam corn; Green Contender, Blue Lake, Kentucky Wonder and Pinkeye Purple Hull beans and Blood Heart beets.

With so many heritage plants and breeds disappearing so quickly, though, sometimes the endangered list contains a few holes. David Pitre of Tecolote Farm raises the yet-to-be-listed, yet at-risk traditional American varieties like the Hill Country Red okra, said to

Jelly Bean, the Guinea hog, Green Gate Farm

have originated in Central Texas, and the Star of David okra, a fat, squat okra shaped like a star of David. Lundgren also grows Star of David okra, and began his crop after an okra plant grew from some hay in an old barn. He guesses the seed had been dormant for many years, as okra seeds stored properly can last up to 200 years.

Tecolote's other heirlooms include the Louisiana Long Green eggplant, Bloomsdale spinach (handed down since the 19th century), Prudens Purple tomato, Cincinnati Market radish and Scarlet Turnip White Tip radish—a variety almost extinct. Pitre also cultivates an unnamed variety of garlic that's been grown by the Czech communities around Halletsville, Texas for many generations. According to David, the garlic is a red variety of the artichoke class of garlics, unknown outside of Central Texas.

Of course the commitment to preserving rare and endangered species of plants and animal breeds offers more than just biodiversity. Raising Guinea hogs (on ALBC's Critical list) led Green Gate Farm's Erin Flynn to become a bit of an historian—turning to books published in the early 1900s for original sources of information about raising this rare breed. She discovered that these utilitarian animals are extremely affectionate, will eat almost anything and are great for killing snakes. As these rare breeds become endangered, so do the knowledge and skill required to properly care for them. To this end, Flynn feels it's vital to share information whenever possible. Green Gate Farm serves as a demonstration farm for the community—hosting CSA and school tours that give people a chance to see rare breeds firsthand and hear their stories.

And with heritage foods, centuries of food culture and immigration come into play, says Jesse Griffiths of Dai Due Supper Club and Butcher Shop. "We're blessed with other cultures doing the homework—France, Mexico, China, Japan, Spain, Italy—then immigrating here. Substitute local products with generations of food gathering, preserving and preparing techniques and you've got a regional food culture that is regenerative, equitable and actually good. Probably the best thing about this type of food is the connection . . . knowing a little bit of its history."

For a sampling of the heritage and native foods available from area producers, please visit edibleaustin.com. The resource list is a work-in-progress. If you're a producer of heritage or native foods, please contact us at info@edibleaustin.com to add your info to the list.

A Louisiana native, **Valerie Broussard** spent 11 years in New York City as a chef, food stylist and writer. She then completed an MA in Food Culture and Communications from the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Parma, Italy before moving to Austin, where she is the Organic Food Coordinator at Barr Mansion and volunteers as Slow Food Austin's Biodiversity Chair.