

Make a Difference

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Preserving Whidbey's Beauty through Traditions and Farming

Living here on Whidbey Island, I sometimes feel time has slowed. We live in a place very similar to the time of my youth. I grew up in western Wisconsin, in a town on the Mississippi River called La Crosse. At the time, there was a thriving downtown, full of a diverse range of locally owned businesses. You could get anything you needed in town. Things were centrally located and the town stopped at the city limits where farms began.

Part way through my childhood, my Mother went back to college to earn her Master's Degree. She was enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a little over two hours away, so it was too far to commute. Instead, she got a small apartment and would either come home on the weekends or we would go visit her. When we visited her, in addition to being able to see my Mom (hi Mom), my second favorite part of this trip was stopping at one of two large roadside vegetable stands not far apart from each other along the highway.

I loved seeing the bins in these stands overflowing with produce: apples, onions, cabbages, acorn squash, and more. There was so much abundance it felt comforting and looked delicious. And because these were authentic farm stands, where the produce was grown right there on the farm, or perhaps on a neighboring farm, the displays were always changing with whatever was in-season. On one trip, we might see a huge hay wagon full of sweet corn. But in a few weeks, a load of winter squash might have taken its place. It was so exciting to see what was new and fresh and in-season. Those changing displays marked the passage of time and told a story of the seasons. After the stand would close for the winter, remembrances of the changing bounty made you smile and gave you something to look forward to in the next year.

The regular visits to those farm stands also created a tradition which added structure to our lives. We had lots of little family traditions that almost always had a food related component. In the fall, we would cross the Mississippi River into Minnesota to sample and buy apples from an area that grew dozens of different varieties. Whenever we took one highway, we would stop at a certain creamery to get some particular type of cheese that was their specialty. If we took

a different route, we would stop at a different shop that made ice cream. This was the "Dairy State" after all!

The point is these were all small, local farm businesses who took pride in the products they made. You were buying from the family that made these foods, with real ingredients. You could only get it from them. They were your neighbors. They remembered you when you came in and would ask about the things you talked about last time you were there. It was unique and special, and created a sense of community and place.

Sixteen years ago, my wife and I made the decision to move our family to Whidbey Island after living in the suburbs of Seattle. We knew we wanted to own some land where we could try our hand at farming. After looking all over the Puget Sound, and even considering moving back to the midwest, we chose Whidbey because of the abundant and beautiful natural resources, farmland in active use, and a community of thoughtful people who are actively engaged in preserving what makes this island special.

We purchased an existing farm from a couple who had retired here and raised cattle. They moved to some land they owned adjacent to our farm and shared with us how to raise cattle and make hay. We did that in addition to growing vegetables that we sold at the local farmers market, a CSA, and to local restaurants.

We love being a part of the farming community here. We appreciated being warmly welcomed by the long-time farmers and hope to be as welcoming to all of the young, new farmers who have settled here in recent years. I am really encouraged by these new farmers. They have searched out internships and training opportunities offered by organizations such as the Organic Farm School, the Whidbey Island Conservation District, and WSU Extension. There are many other local organizations as well who are working to support local farmers in many different ways; Goosefoot, South Whidbey Tilth, Whidbey Island Growers Association, Island County Farm Bureau, and Whidbey Island Grown. All of these organizations share the goal of seeing farmers succeed.

To be successful, farmers need to be able to sell their products. There are different ways to do this, but as you might guess from the experiences I described from my childhood,

ones that allow a direct relationship between the farmer and the eater are my favorite. Knowing the person who grows the food on your plate and having a mutual appreciation for that relationship is something we should make a conscious decision to support. Our relationships are a foundation for building a strong community.

Farmer's markets are unique in their ability to strengthen a community. The market is a place to get fresh, local food, but it is also a social event. You will almost always see someone you know; a neighbor, friend or someone you haven't seen in a while. Or perhaps the farmer you bought from last time will remember you and tell you about something new they have that you need to try. And when you establish this kind of relationship with several farmers at the market, you are building a special bond. They worry about you when you miss a week!

And farm stands, where you are physically at the place where the food is grown is just plain fun. Now that I am older, I think I realize why my parents would stop at those produce stands. It is so much fun to take children to a place like Sherman Pioneer Farm to choose a pumpkin or go to Bell's Farm to pick strawberries. Their eyes light up with excitement – about vegetables of all things! And it creates those traditions I mentioned that were so important to me as a child. Our kids are grown now but they still ask to go pick strawberries in June. And while we grow our own pumpkins, I think they would prefer to go buy them at a farm stand.

Dining out can be another delicious way to make a difference. Many local restaurants and food related businesses are members of Whidbey Island Grown (www.whidbeyisland-grown.com), a member-based organization whose mission is to support local agriculture by promoting Whidbey Island as a destination for authentic rural, farm, and culinary experiences and products. Their goal is for people to think of local farms and great food when they hear about Whidbey Island. And, as a place where farmers can make a living because there is enough demand for their products.

I was back in Wisconsin last summer for a short trip to visit my Mom who was undergoing surgery. I didn't get a chance to drive past those farm stands from long ago so I am not sure if they are still there. Instead, I flew into Minneapolis and rented a car to drive down to my hometown. The changes on my drive through the landscape disturbed me. Dairy farms that once dotted the landscape and practiced rotations of corn, cows and soybeans to naturally build soil fertility, had been replaced by thousands of acres of monocropped corn. Small towns you used to be able to identify just by recognizing the local shops that gave each town its unique personality, were now indistinguishable from the next, having the exact same corporate chain stores in each. This was not the landscape I remember. Nor is it a place I would desire to visit, much less live in.

I haven't done much traveling to other parts of the world, although I hope to someday. Part of the lure of visiting another place is



to engage with what is unique and special about the place. Maybe it is natural beauty, architectural history, or unique wildlife. Many times a destination is known for their culinary traditions. Sampling the local foods are what connect you to their traditions and creates a sense of place.

I believe we have that sense of place here on Whidbey Island. We certainly have the natural beauty, and if we choose to support our local farmers we can build our farm based culinary traditions. We already have several, such as Willowood Farm's Rockwell beans, Penn Cove Shellfish, and Hubbard Squash from Sherman's Pioneer Farm. And there are newer ones too, including Three Sisters Beef, Glendale Shepard cheeses, Whidbey Island Distillery, and others.

This takes effort and it has to be a conscious decision. If we don't actively choose our path, it will be chosen for us based on factors important to others. As a community, what is important to us? The loganberry farm at Greenbank is an example of a lost culinary tradition, but also an example of how engaged citizens worked hard to chart a direction that was important to them. They made a difference.

I am always a bit surprised when I hear some of the reasons why people don't buy from local farmers. Do you have to buy ALL of your food locally? Of course not. Our society sometimes encourages "either/or" thinking. Instead, why not choose "both/and"? Can we shop at grocery stores for many of our needs but also make a conscious choice to buy some local eggs, meats, cheese or veggies, too?

So here is a challenge for you – start a new tradition this year. Take your kids or grandkids to one of the roadside stands or farmers markets here on Whidbey Island, buy something that looks delicious, and have the kids help you prepare it. Not only will this be a fun activity to do, but you will also help keep farmers farming. Supporting local agriculture is an active, conscious, easy, and delicious way to preserve and maintain the scenic beauty of our island.

Local Agriculture Resources

There are currently six farmers markets that stretch the length of the Island. Combine those with a growing number of farm stands and CSA's and Whidbey is becoming a great place for locally grown food.

For more information, visit <http://extension.wsu.edu/island/agriculture/>

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