ARCO FRANCIOSA AND SHAWN HARRISON: City Slickers Down on the Farm

Five years ago, two socially conscious, plant-loving graduates of UC Santa Cruz’s Agro Ecology Program brought their dream of urban farming to Sacramento. Marco Franciosa and Shawn Harrison, passionate about the concept of connecting consumers with locally grown food, established a one-and-a-half-acre organic farm on busy Hurley Way, just a few blocks from Loeppmann’s Plaza and heavily trafficked Fair Oaks Boulevard.

Soil Born Farm’s location is far from the rural setting one normally associates with farms—and that’s exactly the point. “In an urban area, we can expose people to issues about sustainability, how the food system works and where food comes from,” says Franciosa, adding that their goal was to “preserve and nurture” a plot of undeveloped city land.

In our grandparents’ era, “everybody was very connected to their food,” says Harrison. “They knew the person who was growing their potatoes, or who was raising their chickens. There was a communal aspect to it. But as agricultural and food production have developed, a disconnect has been created. The farmer has moved outside of the city, so now there are very urbanized areas, and rural areas where the production occurs. And there’s no connection between the two.”

The energetic pair are building a bridge between the farm and urban consumers by leading school tours, hosting volunteer work parties and offering an apprentice training program for aspiring farmers. Their produce is available in community-supported agriculture boxes and at local restaurants, specialty stores and the Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op.

The pair also is in the process of implementing an “edible schoolyard” program at Jonas Salk Middle School, which borders the farm’s back property. Modeled after Alice Waters’ Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, the project will focus on improving the diet and eating habits of the school’s students through innovative garden-based programming and curriculum.

Their eyes light up as they describe another pet project: assisting in the development of a community-run farmers market in Del Paso Heights. The mission of the farmers market, explains Franciosa, is to provide residents with a source of fresh and healthful food grown by community farmers and neighborhood backyard gardeners.

“It’s an empowering experience when people start to learn how their food is grown,” says Harrison. “If they come to the farm and they learn how a carrot grows, or they help us [in the field], a whole new world is opened up to them. All of a sudden, they experience the process of growing food, rather than just picking it up off the store shelf. And making that connection is a powerful experience.”

SUZANNE ASHWORTH: Saving Seeds for Future Generations

The next time you spy an unusual vegetable or a hope chest-sized squash at the local farmers market, you may have Suzanne Ashworth to thank. Ashworth, a dedicated “seed saver” and organic farmer, is on a one-woman mission to save hundreds of endangered vegetable varieties from extinction.

At Peabody Ranch, her expansive farm in West Sacramento, Ashworth grows a number of field crops that most of us would never recognize. “When seeds aren’t grown consistently, they die,” she states emphatically. “And with them dies the cultural heritage as well as the crop itself.” That’s OK, she says, “if the only tomato you ever want to eat is an Early Girl or a Big Boy. But maybe you want a white tomato or one with pink stripes, or maybe one of the 8,000 tomato varieties that are available.”

Ashworth points out that seed saving also benefits restaurant chefs. “Chefs need those items to make food interesting and unique,” she says. “They can’t all be serving the same stuff, because consumers get bored with the same stuff. We don’t want to go look at the same piece of meat with the foil-baked potato and a blob of squash.” But interesting produce items, she stresses, “don’t just pop out of anywhere. You need seed to start them.”

Each August, Ashworth invites a group of local chefs to her farm for a tour and produce tasting. Often, a chef will be captivated by a particular item and request that Ashworth grow it for his or her menu. That makes her very happy. “The easiest way to bring something back from the brink of extinction, for the dinosaur to live again, is to create demand,” she says briskly.

A project close to her heart is the preservation of America’s heirloom squashes. “All of the great squashes are endangered at the moment,” she notes sadly. “Not every single variety, but a whole slew of them, because they are so big.” Grocery stores won’t stock them and consumers aren’t interested in them, she says, because of their size.

“What are [people] going to do with them?” she asks. “How are you going to take one home and be able to use it all if you’re not an Amish family? They just don’t work for people.”