Thanks to my Italian grandmother, I grew up appreciating food traditions without realizing that’s what they were. Every Christmas, for instance, I anticipated with mouth-watering joy the smell of her kitchen – the lingering background aroma of garlic simmering in olive oil; basil and rosemary-infused ravioli sauce made the day before so that all the flavors would blend; a juicy duck roasting in the oven while she rolled out the huge sheet of ravioli dough on the kitchen table. I still have that yard-long wooden rolling pin and her century-old ravioli roller, yet to properly replicate, try as I might, those delicate postage-stamp ravioli that were her special trademark.

Long after those childhood years, in the process of renewing seed on some 15,000 varieties in the SSE collection at Heritage Farm, I became acutely aware of the diverse heritage of our food, thanks to thousands of years of selection by countless gardeners and farmers throughout the world. Even then, I did not fully appreciate what now seems obvious: that the creation and preservation of genetic diversity is directly the result of place-based food traditions. In other words, people grew and saved those favorite local varieties because they belonged in the favorite foods they cooked, generation after generation.

The person to thank for rendering this fact obvious to me is Gary Nabhan, prolific author, co-founder of Native Seeds/SEARCH, former board member and long-standing friend of the Seed Savers Exchange, champion of both genetic and cultural diversity. His book, *Renewing America’s Food Traditions*, bears a subtitle, *Saving and Savoring the Continent’s Most Endangered Foods*, which clearly suggests that saving endangered varieties of fruits, vegetables, and livestock is intrinsically linked to saving the food traditions that utilize them.

To help advance this important notion, by linking food and history, the Pepperfield Project collaborated with the Seed Savers Exchange to create educational theme dinners last summer featuring some of these endangered heirloom varieties. The several-course meals, served to SSE and community members at Decorah’s Pepperfield Farm, were created by our resident chefs, Lee Chapman and Allison Lukes, from produce grown on the farm with few exceptions, and almost all from seeds I have saved myself.
The second dinner we planned the summer garden around, held in mid-November, was based upon Gary’s Renewing America’s Food Traditions book. Since I had illustrated much of the book, I had already grown and photographed many of the varieties described in it, so these seeds were pulled from Pepperfield’s collection and grown again. In the end, we based the meal upon 25 varieties representing all of the “Food Nations” from which Gary described endangered food traditions. Once again, all varieties were displayed as harvested, the most unique being plants of Mexican Chapalote, reputed to be the oldest known North American corn variety, arriving in the Southwest some 4100 years ago, topping out at 15 feet, next to the earliest and shortest of all corns, three-foot-tall plants of Gus Flint corn harvested by Paiutes but now suffering from climate change die-off, had to be replaced with seeds imported from China and Korea, further illustrating the precariousness of local food traditions.

Of the twelve separate dishes included in the dinner, it would be difficult to extract a favorite, but fair consensus settled on another item on the hors d’oeuvres table – squares of an incredibly savory fried polenta Lee made from the Chapalote corn topped with basil pesto, sun-dried tomatoes, and a dollop of goat cheese lightly baked in the oven. Since none of the 27 guests had eaten quince, another hit among the starters was spiced poached quince sautéed in butter and honey, surrounded by some of the aromatic fruits picked only days before by my son in Sacramento. From the same California garden he sent pomegranates whose colorful seeds decorated the salad course, finely chopped cabbage and Jack’s Copperclad Jerusalem artichokes, with roasted pine nuts and a cranberry dressing.

For the next course, Lee adapted the traditional southern recipe for Hoppin’ John featured in the RAY book, combining brown rice with Clay field peas, onion, garlic, garnished with a few colorful flakes of spicy Louisiana Fish peppers fresh-picked from a potted plant on the display table, and served with fried corn meal breaded Choppee okra.

For a soup based on Native American “three sisters” corn, bean, and squash cultivation, I followed Gary’s reporting of the traditional way for making hominy.
Four Corners Stuffed Sweet Peppers

by cooking both Yellow Hickory King and Osage Red flint corn in wood ashes, which Lee combined with Arikara Yellow beans, Sibley winter squash, and Ozette potatoes treasured for over two centuries by the Makah people of Neah Bay, Washington, with a little added heat from more Fish peppers.

Lee baked the three Narragansett toms on a bed of fresh garden celery, carrots, and herbs to flavor the drippings. He invented a dressing made from wild rice hand-harvested and parched from Minnesota’s northern lakes by Pepperfield’s 2012 intern, Klaus Zimmer, dried morel mushrooms from the farm, leeks, and American Chestnuts just harvested by our Minnesota friends at Badgersett who are part of the breeding ef-

fort to create a blight-resistant version of this American icon. Slices of juicy turkey breast were served on a bed of Ozette mashed potatoes and the dressing, all coated with rich gravy made from the herb-laced drippings. On the main course plate we also included another item adapted from a recipe in the book – maple syrup glazed Southern Queen sweet potatoes and Sibley squash flavored with Meyer lemons fresh picked from a potted tree laden with ripe fruit right in the living room where the dinner was served. Fresh Brussels sprouts from the garden added color to the plate.

Allison once again baked the dessert, a Streusel featuring another place-based variety, Boston Marrow winter squash. I totally stumped everyone with a contest to see who could identify the slice of brilliant magenta fruit added to each dessert plate. Another box had serendipitously arrived that very day from my son in California which this time contained some ripe fruits of prickly pear cactus. No one came even close to the answer, but neither did anyone hesitate to try cactus pears for the first time.

While we tried in the RAFT dinner to more or less follow a few recipes linked to local food traditions, perhaps we started a new food tradition, one in the spirit of the Seed Savers Exchange itself, based upon rare foods from everywhere, brought by immigrants preserving their own traditions from their homelands the world over, as well as foods cherished by Native Ameri-

The 2014 dinner schedule is included on page 27.

Fresh Herb and Goat Cheese Stuffed Sweet Peppers

In this case, we used a popular Seed Savers Exchange variety from Hungary, Feherozoon, but any sweet ripe bell, cheese, or pimento-shaped variety would do. For added brilliance, use ripe or unripe peppers of other available colors, adding green, yellow, red, brown, and purple.

Serves six

Ingredients:

• 3 medium sweet ripe peppers
• 14 oz. organic fresh goat cheese
• ¼ cup cream, if needed
• ½ cup packed parsley, chopped
• ¼ cup packed Italian Genovese basil, torn
• 2 tablespoons oregano, chopped
• 2 medium shallots, minced
• 1 tablespoon lemon zest
• Juice from half a lemon
• Olive oil
• Sea salt
• Black pepper

Directions:

1. Preheat oven at 350.
2. Halve the peppers lengthwise and remove seeds/membrane. Rub peppers with oil, salt and pepper. Set aside.
3. In a food processor, combine the cheese, herbs, shallots, lemon zest and half the lemon juice. Process until smooth, (if needed, slowly add cream to start processing). Season to taste with salt, pepper and remaining lemon juice if needed. Mix until incorporated.
4. Fill peppers with goat cheese mixture. Place stuffed peppers in glass baking dish, add water to bottom of pan and cover with foil.
5. Bake for 15 to 18 minutes. Remove foil. Peppers should remain firm.
6. Serve warm or at room temperature.

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