

Another Reason to Love June

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I will provide a sketch of the special attributes of the Willamette Valley by describing the process of discovering and introducing a new crop, *frikeh*, to Portland – a qualitative look at the food system of the valley.

A year after buying our farm, a lanky man named Eric Pond arrived. Eric was running the agricultural program at Laurelwood Academy, a school run by the Seventh Day Adventists. He wanted to know if his students could pick some berries to sell at their Portland Farmer's Market stall and to their restaurant accounts. Put together a taciturn New Englander with an appetite for meat and wine, and an affable Oregonian who, consistent with his Adventist belief, eats no animal products and drinks no alcohol, you have the basis for a productive friendship. We have to talk about crops.

The students were not great pickers, and soon the work fell to my staff. Eric introduced Cory Schreiber to our blackberries. When Eric decided to leave the academy to grow organic blueberries, he introduced us to Cory. It was through Eric that we developed a taste for direct sales. He also started our long fulmination about small grains.

Over the last decade, the valley has developed a tight community of organic market growers. Most of us are immigrants to the valley, well educated but not formally trained as farmers. Until the last few years, even discussion of organic farming in the land grant and extension system was death to a career, and so a less formal, community-based system of research and sharing knowledge arose. Eric is one of dozens of farmers who, generous with his knowledge and ideas, we credit for improving our own farming and marketing skills.

In the spring of 2003, Carol and I ordered a small thresher. We needed the machine to increase our dry bean production. Our conversations with Eric about small grains led us to order a set of concaves and screens for wheat and barley as well. Just on a hunch. The problem with small grains is that the aesthetics are wonderful; the economics are awful. To fit into a small market farm, we needed a grain that would earn more per pound than the \$4.00 or so a 60 lb bushel of wheat earns the average farmer.

While waiting for the thresher, we remembered a package of green wheat, *grünkern*, we had seen ages earlier at the Eidelweiss Deli. Anyone who has shopped there before Thanksgiving or Christmas knows you grab a number and then have plenty of time to read every package in the place. After interminable web searches we found a paper in *Economic Botany* describing the preparation of parched green wheat, or *frikeh*. Throughout the Middle East, from Egypt to Turkey, there is an ancient tradition of enjoying durum wheat in its immature (green) state as a perishable, seasonal delicacy. For a small farm, it was a perfect crop. The harvest window is 72 hours, it is labor intensive, there are no domestic producers, and the market price is about \$6.00 per pound.

With an interesting crop in mind, we now had to get some durum wheat. We started with OSU Extension. Their wheat expert had never heard of *frikeh*, was uninterested, and told us he had tried growing durum in the valley and it was a failure. He also explained that there were no winter durum varieties. For organic growers, over-wintered grains are essential because the plants establish themselves before the weeds sprout in the spring.

Undaunted by that gloomy Gus, perhaps even energized by his ennui, we continued the search for durum. We discovered the unit of trade is a railroad car or so full, as we were passed from one grain handler to the next. Finally, we reached an office manager who was actually interested in our plan, and had been tripping over a three partially filled sacks of foundation durum DOI912 cleaned out of an elevator boot, about 100 pounds. She was happy to send it us. We planted the durum that autumn, hoping it would survive the winter.

With the durum sprouting in the field, the thresher arrived, and we started the next stage of research. What can you do with this unfamiliar crop? It is not enough to toss something new on the market table, and expect people to buy and eat it. They must be engaged by prospect, and guided in its preparation. We returned to the web and cookbooks. The search turned up an email discussion moderated by Paula Wolfert just a few days earlier, and there were questions about an ingredient called *frikeh* cited in her book, *Mediterranean Grains and Greens*. One knowledgeable soul in that discussion was identified as “Trillium.” A quick note confirmed that it was Trillium Blackmer, who we knew from the Hillsdale market as a connoisseur of beans, especially the borlotti that she had not seen outside of her Grandpa Siciliano’s kitchen. Trillium was one of the reasons we needed the thresher to up our bean production.

In our exchanges about *frikeh*, Trillium asked if we knew anyone growing Balaton cherries. They were her favorite when she lived in the Midwest. Balatons are one of several beautiful mahogany skinned cherry varieties with a rich garnet red flesh grown on the hillsides above Lake Balaton in Hungary. Rich in tannins, with a fine balance of sugars and acidity, their flavor is distinct. We have planted nearly an acre of Hungarian cherries. There is a knowledgeable community of people who shop at farmer’s markets. Just as farmers try to nudge them towards new vegetables and fruits, they are equally diligent in nudging us in new directions as well.

The Wolfert book had a couple of recipes calling for *frikeh*. The book also opened our eyes to the equally ancient art of collecting and blending greens to make preboggoin, hortas and misticanza. Another specialty we have adopted -- a second branch on the road to *frikeh*. Another book, Jenni Muir’s *A Cook’s Guide to Grains* had a good section on *frikeh*, and also introduced us to the hullless, or naked barleys. These ancient barleys do not require pearling, are more nutritious than the hulled types, and have a tremendous variety of colors, textures and flavors. This year, we are introducing naked barleys to our customers, a third fork in the *frikeh* road.

By mid June, verdant waves of grain were rustling in the wind. Beautiful to look at, but we were feeling a bit insecure as we did not have an uncle Nabib to guide us in the

processing. The grain must be parched during the short transition between the milk stage and soft dough stage; the parching halts the conversion of sugar to starch. Test runs were parched with a plumber's torch and threshed between our hands. Tasting the first batch affirmed our efforts, and those endless phone calls ten months earlier. The chewy green grain was smoky, slightly sweet with a grassy flavor. It has been described as "smoky and sensuous."

We determined it was perfect time to start burning. We prepared corrugated metal sheets, filled propane tanks, shook out some tarps, and set the thresher in position. The next morning, Carol passed the firehouse on the way home from the mail to see a big sign announcing "BURN BAN TODAY." Worse yet, they were having some sort of terrorism drill and we had a fire truck parked in our driveway all morning. We shrugged our shoulders and agreed that this was a vegetarian barbecue.

Another important attribute of the Willamette Valley is its community of highly skilled agricultural workers. Virtually every fruit and vegetable is nurtured by and passes through *piel canela* – cinnamon skin. Mostly from Oaxaca and Guatemala, these workers are highly skilled and creative. There would be few bottles of pinot noir without this skilled labor force, and virtually no fresh vegetables and fruits.

Collectively, our staff has about 80 years of field experience, and they are deeply involved in our management decisions. We actively encourage our staff to pick vegetables and fruits for their own table and, towards the end of a harvest, bring their friends to glean. They all share information, a nugget here, a nugget there, making us a better-managed operation.

Oregon has long had a rough time dealing with immigrants. It is notorious as a former "sundown" state. In various cities through the state, people of Chinese descent were not allowed to own land within city limits. The alacrity and efficiency with which people of Japanese descent were interred, including WWI veterans, their farms and property seized, is chilling.

The language of the current attack on Latin American immigrants is infused with fear, just as in the past. They are taking your jobs, they are criminals, they might be terrorists, they don't share our values, and so forth. Boiling below the surface of the current debate are sentiments no better than before. The angry invective of the Minutemen is a disturbing throwback to the 1920s and earlier when the anti-Asian movement was trying out its ideas. As you savor that first berry of the season, give a thought to those who made it possible.

By 11:00, the first run of wheat had been cut, swathed and was now ready to parch. Based on my two days of work with the plumber's torch, I was Oregon's leading expert in *frikeh* production. We laid out the metal sheets and fired up the big torch. The art is to burn off the awns down to the tip of the grain and then cool the head so the rest of it is not burned. Once cooled, the wheat is threshed. By the end of the day, we had about 200

pounds of *frikeh* buried in a mass of charred awns and stalks. We spread it out to dry on tarps.

Everyone loves *frikeh*. That night our staff cooked up a big pot. Carol and I made a *frikeh* pilaf. And during the night, a microbial community settled in to enjoy the nutritious mass of grain. We were *all* sated. In the morning, the first run was hauled to the compost. Microbes are the great levelers, rendering a day's work worthless overnight.

Now Oregon's leading expert in *frikeh* production, Zenón took over the next day's production, and Carol and I scrambled to make up a dozen or so drying screens. The tarps had prevented the heavy moisture laden air from dropping out of the wheat; the screens might solve the problems. By the end of the day, Zenón had taken my exuberant process, reminiscent of Breugel's frolicking peasants, and turned it into an efficient, comfortable production line. The screens allowed the grain to dry quickly, and have been pressed into service for other crops as well. We processed a couple hundred pounds more *frikeh* that first year.

Our *frikeh* made its Oregon debut 29 June 2004 at a wine event in Dundee, escorted by Greg Higgins. Dressed in a tabbouleh styled salad, the smoky, sensuous grain was perfumed with lemon and mint, true to its Middle Eastern origin, and caused a stir among the oenophiles. The debut even received notice in *Wheat Life*. Portland's restaurants, along with our customers at the Hillsdale Farmer's Market, consumed about a ½ ton of the delicacy last year. Mostly, it finds its way into salads, pilafs and kibbeh.

In early July, fresh *frikeh* will return to the tables of Damascus, Aleppo and Petra, as well as those of Wildwood, Nostrana, Castagna, Park Kitchen, Higgins, and scattered domiciles through this city. In three short seasons, it has become another reason to welcome summer.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture recently announced that they were preparing additional food safety regulations for farmer's markets. Citing of recent outbreaks in the Salinas Valley, the Department wants to provide market farmers with another overlay of rules "for our own good."

Over the last decade we have had repeated food borne illness incidents resulting in illnesses and deaths that are clearly linked to large-scale farming and food distribution. These are big companies, Dole, ConAgra, Wal-Mart for instance, that faithfully comply with all of the Byzantine labeling and packaging rules, as well as the commercial standards for washing, handling, storage and transportation of food. The packing houses are festooned with warnings and notices, and everyone is wearing a hair net, a face mask and plastic gloves. Yet, the outbreaks continue to occur.

Across the nation, people have reacted to the outbreaks by seeking sources of local food. People grasp the notion that the most reliable food safety officers are the farmers who sit down every night and eat the food they grow. We eat what we grow, feed it to our family,

staff and friends, and greet the customers who choose to return week after week to buy the same food that will be on our table that night. It is a pretty good system of food safety, and a logical antidote to a real problem. Prescriptive rules on food safety will likely eliminate experiments such as *frikeh*.

As I think about our experience with *frikeh*, it was crafted from happenstance and serendipity, and largely due to people whose paths crossed the farm somehow. Oregon has a wonderful climate and soils, but we would be pretty mediocre farmers if people were not generous with their ideas and enthusiasm. There is something about Oregon that draws out the community gene in people. Doesn't always happen, but the capacity is here, the culture is here, and when it expresses itself, Oregon is a better place to live and work.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you this morning.

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Ayers Creek Farm

Anthony and Carol Boutard operate Ayers Creek Farm located in Gaston, Oregon. The farm has about 100 acres of cultivated ground certified organic by Oregon Tilth. The Boutards grow grains, cane berries, stone fruit, chestnuts, greens and root vegetables. They sell over 100 different varieties of fruits grains and vegetables.

They have a stall at the Hillsdale Farmers Market where they sell fresh fruits, grains and vegetables in the summer and winter months. All of their produce is grown outdoors, even in the winter. The produce a line of preserves available at local stores, including Steve's Cheese, Foster& Dobbs and Pastaworks. Their fresh blackberries are carried by New Seasons Markets. Several local restaurants feature their grains, greens and fruit. The blackberry soda at Hot Lips Pizza is made from their berries.