

# A Profile of Renaissance Acres Organic Herb Farm

by Lani Kwon Meilgaard

Driving the twenty or so minutes northwest of Ann Arbor towards Whitmore Lake in late June, I am amazed by how expansive our surroundings have become. Deciduous trees and lush vegetation along US-23 rapidly replace the Ann Arbor cityscape and, since it is a Wednesday afternoon, there is very little traffic. When we exit on North Territorial Road, the asphalt freeway soon becomes a two-lane paved road, and then a dirt road lined by farms, barns and countryside.

My husband, Justin, and I check our Mapquest printout to find our way to Renaissance Acres Organic Herb Farm, owned and operated by Peter and Kristina Stark. Finally, after a couple of turns, we drive onto Valentine Road and up to a modest round beige sign with hand-painted red and black lettering. There is an ample grass lawn, where visitors may park May through September, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., in order to buy produce or plants, cuttings and seed and to attend classes. Peter is expecting us and is working out in the front yard near the greenhouses to one side of a single-story wooden farmhouse, which he tells me was built in 1894. It is a breezy, sunny day, comfortable enough to sit outside in lawn chairs and chat.

My first impression of Peter is that he's tan, his hands are wide and strong and he's wearing jeans, a T-shirt and Detroit Red Wings cap. He's down-to-earth, easy to talk with and a savvy businessman who is probably able to interact well with many different kinds of people. He wants to know a little about our backgrounds first: how long we've lived in Michigan (six years), where we're from originally (me, Hawaii; my husband; England). The fact that we're city dwellers and don't know much about farming must be patently obvious, but I tell him this anyway, letting him know we're eager to learn and open to understanding what he does and how and why he does it. He apologizes that Kristina is unable to join us, as she's visiting her family that day, but asks that we include her in any mention of the farm. "We're a team. She has the artistic eye, handles the display gardens and research, and does the gift shop and many of the classes. I do the heavy work, the [Ann Arbor] Farmer's Market, some classes and consulting." Together, along with a few part-time seasonal employees and volunteers, they specialize in 300+ varieties of authentically grown culinary, medicinal, ceremonial and craft/dye herbs, as well as scented geraniums, flavorful greens and heirloom vegetables. Their best sellers are the many varieties of basil they grow, including lime-basil and traditional Italian basil. They sell to restaurants, such as Eve and Zingermans, and also have plants in private and public collections, such as at Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Toledo Botanical Gardens, Project Grow and the Leslie Science Center in Ann Arbor. Whenever the breeze picks up, we are treated to the lovely aromas of lavender and jasmine, the scents of sage and basil, a feast for the senses.

When I ask him about the name Renaissance Acres Organic Herb Farm, Peter tells me the farm itself went through a "rebirth." It was originally an 80-acre dairy farm at the turn of the century, then was owned by a farmer and his sons who found their callings elsewhere. Fortunately, when Peter and Kristina bought their twenty-one acres, the land

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had not been treated with any chemicals or commercial fertilizers. Even so, organic agricultural production is still a difficult endeavor. There are the unavoidable challenges that all farmers face: competition, ups and downs in the market and weather, especially in Michigan with its short 3-4 1/2 month growing season and wildly varying seasonal temperatures and conditions. Just the week before there had been a hail storm, and had it directly hit Renaissance Acres Organic Herb Farm, it could have wiped out their crops. Organic farmers additionally face the challenges of politicized governmental organic certification, and competition with big agribusiness seeking to dilute those standards and take a larger cut of the rapidly growing organic market. Yet through hard work, perseverance and integrity to authentic growing methods, Peter and Kristina are celebrating their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year at their Herb Farm.

"We've had our ups and downs, but there isn't anything I'd rather be doing." Peter grins as he adds, "There's something wonderful about being outdoors all day and living in-sync with nature, but you have to be really flexible and go with the flow." He grew up in Saginaw and lived in a vegetarian co-op in the '70s, which later led him to organic farming in the Irish Hills. He briefly attended the University of Michigan and studied biology, but he found he could learn about plants and their medicinal and culinary uses much better hands-on, through independent research and with teachers and mentors closer to the earth. When he's not working on the farm, Peter is also a musician and songwriter and plays the blues, jazz and contemporary folk on the guitar and dulcimer. His partner, Kristina, grew up in Detroit and they met in 1980 via mutual friends who introduced them in Ann Arbor. They have a son, Benjamin, who is eighteen and has just left home but lives nearby. There are also a mastiff-mixed-breed dog named Blue and a goose named Ducky who both decide to check us out while we talk.

Then, the sensational sensorial part of the visit begins: a tour of the gardens and green-



Kristina and Peter Stark of the Renaissance Acres Organic Farm in Whitmore Lake.

Photo by Kris Doten

houses and sampling of herbs. Peter encourages us city folk to bite into a blade of lemongrass, which is sweet and tangy and oddly satisfying. "Now you're country folk," he teases us, and we laugh, feeling like kids again, trying something fun and new. He invites us to touch, smell and taste many other amazing herbs, flowers and vegetables and tells us about their culinary, medicinal and ceremonial properties. French perfumeries at the turn of the century replaced roses with less expensive rose-scented geraniums, with few people in the know. Flaxseed oil is really good for alleviating seasonal depression. Greek oregano has the best antioxidant properties. He grabs two plastic baggies from the house for us to contain our herbal loot: one for culinary herbs, several varieties of basil and oregano, the other for medicinal and ceremonial uses, sweetgrass and sage. We walk among rows of neatly potted herbs and flowers lined up on display tables in the front yard, as well as along well-ordered, mulched vegetable beds in a fenced enclosure to protect the tender plants against ravenous rabbits and deer. The herbs we have collected have a pungent yet pleasant fragrance and feel warm through the baggies from the afternoon sunshine.

As we walk back towards our car, he explains to us that he and Kristina propagate their plants by root divisions, cuttings and seeds and that, because they grow them in greenhouses with a 35-degree thermostat in winter, they are very hearty plants. The plants look healthy, green and vibrant. He tells us that he has also consulted with several community groups over the past two decades, including the University of Michigan's Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research Center, MFit and also with the Ojibwa tribe, who wanted to start and maintain their own organic farm operation, to give their youth a more meaningful connection to the earth and their tribe. This leads to a discussion on good books, and Peter recommends *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World* by aptly named Michael Pollan, a (pardon pun) ground-breaking investigation into the co-evolution of humankind and plants. It is a fascinating conversation, and before we know it, our two-hour visit has come to an end. My husband and I feel welcomed, accepted and much better educated about farming and the interconnections with our natural world. We thank Peter and head back home to Ann Arbor, enjoying what I call the mid-afternoon "golden time," when the sun is low in the sky but still gilding everything.

Later that evening, I rinse, chop and add the several varieties of oregano and basil to a marinara sauce, and it's incredibly good and savory. This is but one of the reasons we often go to the Ann Arbor Farmer's Market, to buy high-quality organic produce and to interact and learn from the farmers. Now we know it's also possible to buy plants and seed from a reliable source not far from town and to grow our own organic herbs and vegetables should we desire.

Thank you, Peter and Kristina Stark! We are grateful for your commitment and contribution to our community.

Renaissance Acres Organic Herb Farm  
4450 Valentine Road  
Whitmore Lake, MI 48189-9691  
Website: <http://www.provide.net/~raohf/>

Catalog is free .pdf download or you may send \$3 via mail for a copy.

*In the Herb Garden* cookbook, a collection of herbal recipes, by the Starks is also available for \$9.50 postpaid.

Phone: 734-449-8336

E-mail: [raohf@provide.net](mailto:raohf@provide.net)

Dates/times open: May to September

Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Also at Ann Arbor Farmer's Market Saturday mornings and Wednesdays mid-May to mid-June (except holidays).