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The family tree: One family has kept a bit of Italy alive for 80 years

By SUSAN AGER
Free Press Columnist

Reader comments: Requested by Michael Madden, Davison.

"Nothing great is created suddenly, any more than a bunch of grapes or a fig. If you tell me that you desire a fig, I answer you that there must be time. Let it first blossom, then bear fruit, then ripen." - Epicetus, First-Century Greek philosopher

In the lush backyard of his home, amid grapevines and tomato plants and hollyhocks, Brian Cain also tends tradition. It's a dirty, deliberate, twice-a-year ritual most of us might find too challenging. The tradition takes the shape of a gangly fig tree, about 17 feet tall and 8 inches in diameter, that leans against the back of Brian's yellow garage. Its uppermost fruit dangles 3 feet over the garage roof.

Brian's grandfather transported the tradition from Italy almost 80 years ago.

That's when Michele Arcangelo Coppa carried into this country from the island of Ponza a foot-long stick, sporting a few buds. The stick had been cut from one of the countless fig trees that grow thick in their native Mediterranean.

Nobody knows if he cut it himself, or if his father or a friend cut it for him to take to America as a reminder of home.

But then, like a madman, he planted the stick in his yard on Detroit's far northeast side.

Eight decades and another cutting later, the tree thrives in Grand Rapids, whose winters are no more tender to figs than Detroit's. But men who set out to keep family traditions alive can do so if they've got the will and know the way.

When I asked readers for special places in Michigan to visit this summer, Brian Cain's neighbor, Ruth Steele Walker, told me about the tree he's growing to honor his grandfather.

She told me Brian buries the tree every winter to keep it alive. What? She told me he weighs it down with cement blocks. What?

"It's probably been in Brian's yard for 20 years," she wrote, "and its figs are delicious."

Experts would predict no Old World fig tree could survive a Michigan winter, certainly not with enough oomph to produce prolific fruit. Freezing temperatures would destroy the tree's new growth or nip off its embryonic fruit.

I couldn't wait to meet Brian Cain, because I swoon at the feet of anyone who proves an expert wrong.

A rough start

I arrive in the early morning, before Brian hits the road to market wines throughout southwest Michigan, both his job and his passion.

Raindrops glisten on tens of thousands of leaves of all that grows in his thickly planted yard. We can see it all from a tiny glassed-in porch where, while I drink coffee, Brian sips tea from a big cup, darkly stained inside.

"I never scrub it," he says, "because I've heard the tannins in the tea will attach to the tannins in the stain." He guesses the stain in his morning teacup is 20 years deep.

At 55, he respects what time can accomplish simply by passing. In his garage, for example, he makes wine from grapes he grows himself, aging it in oak barrels.

We talk of his fig tree, which, he concedes upon reflection, is his only inheritance from his mother's father.

His Grandpa Coppa at first brought just a few clothes to the United States to work in a West Virginia mining camp. His first years were tough and sad.

His fiancé, Filomena, made her passage on a ship overtaken by infection. Passengers' cargo was burned, including her hope chest. After her first baby died in infancy, she fled home to Italy.

Grandpa made several trips across the ocean to woo her back. He had moved to Detroit, to take advantage of the auto industry. He promised her life would be better.

On one of those trips, perhaps when she finally joined him, he brought the fig cutting to America.

Finally, he put down roots.

To California and back

When Brian Cain was just a toddler, his grandpa's tree made an impression on him. "It was huge," he says, "and seemed much bigger than my own does now. I remember it vividly, although I don't know quite how." His grandparents called the fruit "figadeen," a word he thinks they made up. He watched them eat figs but didn't eat any himself.

When Brian was 3, more than a half-century ago, his grandparents retired to San Diego. Grandpa took a cutting of his tree, where it thrived in the southern California heat. Six years later, when he returned to visit his Michigan family, he brought for his daughter Eva a piece of what Brian calls "the family tree."

Because it is only a plant, not a person, nobody remembers exactly where it went when, or how it survived. For years Eva moved it from the ground to a pot and back as Brian's father, Albert, was transferred around the state.

She took her father's tree with her from Detroit to Grand Rapids to Traverse City to Jackson.

Once, she grieved when her unsentimental husband demanded she leave it behind. A sympathetic neighbor dug it up and brought it to Eva during a visit.

Brian's 78-year-old mother told me by phone: "Moving it so many times stunted it."

Eventually, in 1980, when the couple moved to an apartment, Eva turned over the potted fig to Brian, the only one of her children who seemed settled.

Remembering his grandpa, Brian put the plant in the ground, expecting a big harvest. But for two summers it produced nothing. Brian was baffled.

His mother wasn't. "If you want fruit, you've got to bury it!" she told him, then recounted her father's fall and spring rituals in Detroit, using a pulley and winch to bring his tree to the ground before winter set in.

Annual interment, resurrection

Brian took up that Old World ritual when he transplanted the tree to the yard of his current home. "I planted it on a 45-degree lean," he recalls, "straightening it up each

summer, and bending it to the ground each fall. Now it requires several cement blocks and an earth anchor to tie it down and weight it down."

The process of inching it down for burial takes about two weeks, usually only 10 or 15 minutes each day. Eventually, to press it down further, the 200-pound Brian walks up the trunk. Every time he forces it lower, he ties it tighter with rope wrapped round its limbs to a steel screw-eye in the ground. Then, he wraps it in an old black tarp that once covered his small swimming pool.

At that point, it resembles a big dead body curled up against the garage.

Finally, he mounds it with 3 or 4 feet of dead leaves and yard waste so the tree can slumber in total darkness, without freezing, until spring.

In April, he unearths it. He eases it slowly upright, the way you'd help an old man who has fallen. He props it first with a stick of lumber, forcing it higher each day until the buds can catch the sun they need to swell by late summer into figs. Now, when I visit, they are bright green and firm, scores of figs-to-be. How does he know when they're ripe? "They turn a blush color," he says, almost as deep as a red grape, "and they droop, like a satchel thrown over your shoulder. Then you wait a few days, but not too many or little ants will get 'em."

And their taste? He struggles. "They're such an incredible thing!" Brian says. "The skin is about as firm as a peach, and not really fuzzy but not smooth, either. And the flesh is really, really soft, with the bright freshness you get with an apple."

Funny, but he might be describing a wine.

To pick early figs, he must usually clamber up an old wooden ladder to the top of the garage. To pick later figs, he can stay on the ground. Usually he eats them right away, unadorned, but tries to share with his wife, Alice, admiring friends, and his mother.

"He's so proud of that tree," she says. "It's grown like crazy for him because he put it in one place and left it there."

On Thursday, just 72 hours after my visit, Brian tells me by phone with a thrill in his voice that he tried his first fig of the season! "It was barely blushed," he said, "just short of ripe, but it was drooping so I just pulled it off and ate it on the spot."

It was not at its best, but it offered a hint of the harvest to come.

Brian's grandparents' home on Coram in Detroit, where the tree first grew, is bulldozed now. Their home in San Diego, after their deaths, fell to people who may well have taken the tree down, indifferent to its history.

He has lost track of a handful of cuttings he's given to friends. But because he has no children, Brian wonders if the tree can survive this century within the family. A sister and her husband haven't taken the trouble, he says, to keep a young tree in their own yard fruitful.

"They're always afraid they're going to break it! I tell them to just step on the thing."

Then he says, without a fig of regret: "I am the keeper of the family tree."