

Plantin' Seeds

CREATING INTENTIONAL CONNECTIONS

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Sometimes there's nothing like a good metaphor to illustrate a concept. Plantin' Seeds uses the germination process to illuminate its mission of educating the wider community about farms, local food, and the importance of sowing seeds and ideas in fertile soil.

There are two components to the Plantin' Seeds organization: plantin' seeds farm kitchen in Canaan, and Pom's Cabin Farm in Falls Village, where Plantin' Seeds was first conceived. Both are instructional venues for educational programs.

Magical thinking

Plantin' Seeds is the intuition child of Falls Village resident Dale McDonald. Her vision, in collaboration with a team of local farmers, chefs, and other dedicated individuals, was to create an opening for ideas about this local area's particular intersection of farming, food, and community, which is a defining part of our lives here.

McDonald is a firm believer that direct experience is a wise teacher. She also has faith in the power of creating an intentional space and allowing others to fill it with their talents and energy. Two such bringers-of-energy are Brandon Scimeca and Tracy Hayhurst.

A farmer and seasoned CIA-trained chef, Scimeca is Plantin' Seeds' director of education. Hayhurst,



formerly of Chubby Bunny Farm and trained at Ireland's famed Ballymaloe Cookery School, is director of community outreach. Together with McDonald and other team members, they nurture Plantin' Seeds' growth process with their collective expertise and fertilize it with a healthy dose of magic.

Experiential learning

Although it serves delicious and local fare, plantin' seeds farm kitchen is not a restaurant. Since its opening in June 2015, it's been all about education – a very particular kind of education.

The meal or program is the textbook, the teachable moment, and the direct experience of the food, the land, and the farmer who bridges the two. Each learning event is designed with a specific concept or ingredient in mind. Scimeca and Hayhurst take turns creating these edible educational forums.

The homey farm dining room in Canaan, CT allows a full view into the gleaming commercial chef's kitchen on one side and Main Street on the other. This communal space represents the nexus between food

and people. Every person that walks through the door should come prepared to interact, learn, and be changed by the experience.

Plantin' seeds farm kitchen is definitely not the place for a romantic dinner à deux. Scimeca explains, "When Tracy and I prepare a meal, we're not thinking of ourselves as chefs. We're educators. Our goal is to more intentionally connect the source of the food on our plates to the farmers who grow it. The meal is an opportunity to create relationships with the land and those we share it with," he adds, "If there's an open seat, you're sitting in it. The tables are for building connections and initiating conversation, not seclusion."

These community relationships are also at the heart of Plantin' Seeds' work. Hayhurst explains, "We live in a rural community. We need to break down barriers between people producing our food and those consuming it. Every meal we prepare is an opportunity to expose the interconnectedness



Above top: Brandon Scimeca introducing Inspiration Dinner for plantin' seeds farm kitchen on Main Street in Canaan, CT. Above: plantin' seeds farm kitchen on Main Street in Canaan, CT. Left: A plantin' seeds taco. All photos courtesy of Plantin' Seeds.



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between people and the land.”

Alternatively, Pom's Cabin Farm provides the living laboratory and incubator of inspiration. The farm, with wildflower meadows, fields, and trails, and populated with robust blueberry bushes, sits aside a lazy, meandering stretch of the Housatonic River. Hands-on experiences, such as composting workshops and land walks at Equinox and Solstice are offered here.

Labor Theory of Value

Another component of the Plantin' Seeds ethos is its pricing structure — there is none. However, there is a donation policy for meals, programs, and workshops.

For McDonald, Scimeca, and Hayhurst this is another exercise in intentionality and an opportunity to really think about the experience you've just had. Scimeca elaborates that, “We want people to think about the food itself and what kind of local labor and costs went into bringing it to your plate.”

McDonald explains, “Our country's food pricing system, and the layers that exist between how food is grown and consumed, distracts from its true value. It veils our relationship to the land. We believe that the direct experience of the land and food, through the medium of a meal or workshop, will expose that bond and allow you to view value of it in a different way.”

McDonald is also clear that there is no judgment about what's in the miniature burlap donation sacks on each table at the end of the night. It's

your responsibility to determine the value of the experience and what you learned from it.

Educating young palates

Scimeca is also concerned with educating our youngest citizens about where food comes from and cultivating their palates to the taste of real food. He has teamed with North Canaan Elementary School (NCES) to do just that.

This summer, garden beds have been built to create a school yard garden that will be tended to by NCES students during the school year and Camp AHA! over the summer. Scimeca sees this kind of education as crucial to the mission of Plantin' Seeds, “NCES students will learn how to grow their own food in a way that is both hands-on and linked to their curriculum. They'll experience firsthand the satisfaction of nurturing a plant from seed to harvest.”

Scimeca is also introducing “taste education” to NCES students. Taste education provides a direct sensory experience of a food using all senses, but particularly the flavor of the food. The purpose is to really think about the food in an intimate and immediate way, not in the superficial manner that we Americans are famous for.

Last spring, with NCES students, Scimeca explored carrots prepared in a multitude of ways, e.g., steamed, pureed, and roasted. He encouraged the students to explore the carrots and critically think about their appearance, smell, texture, and flavor. How are they different? Which are most visually appealing? Is the flavor sweet, salty, bitter, acidic or — the one we always forget — umami?

For Scimeca, taste education is fundamental to caring about food and the land, and ultimately to the choices we make in our own diets and for our towns. The child then becomes the food spokesperson and advocate in his or her own home, school, and community.

In the future, Scimeca hopes other schools in Region One will be open to developing gardens and taste education curriculum. He envisions a scenario where each school's efforts will be linked together by a common thread, perhaps a joint gardener/edu-



Above: Tracy Hayhurst making crepes in plantin' seeds farm kitchen on Main Street in Canaan, CT.

cator or a larger unifying garden plan.

FED Talks

Plantin' Seeds also has other opportunities to learn and foster community through lectures, workshops, and inspiration dinners. Hayhurst and Scimeca regularly plan these events throughout the year. In them, they explore a cooking method, concept, local farm, or an ingredient.

Inspiration dinners tap into the creative juices of Hayhurst and Scimeca. They allow them to delve deeper and to expose attendees to a new way of thinking. An example of this is the recent dinner that celebrated the fledgling North Canaan Farmers Market.

All ingredients for that dinner experience came from farmers who sell at the market. The meal showcased the depth and breadth of local produce and meat available there. Farmers, market organizers, and curious community members discussed the food on their plates, how it was prepared, the challenges and rewards of farming life, inventive solutions to



Above: Interior of plantin' seeds farm kitchen on Main Street in Canaan, CT. Left: Cookies served at an invitational cookout event at Pom's Cabin Farm in Falls Village, CT.



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rural living, and how to protect crops from predatory rabbits.

Living Lectures

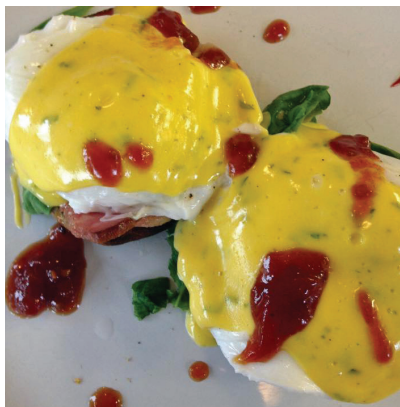
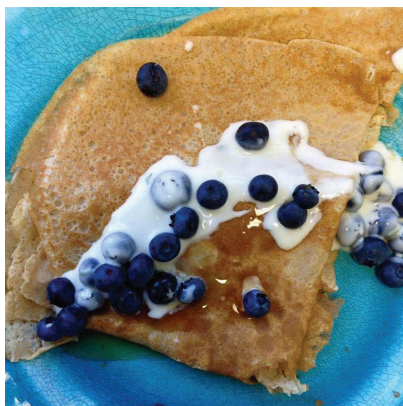
Lecture topics run the gamut. This past spring there was a film viewing and a discussion about the film *Dirt*. When the weather is fine, these lectures take to the fields and pastures. In July, Plantin' Seeds organized a live lecture at James and Linda Quella's Q Farms in Sharon, CT.

On a stunning summer evening, a group of interested farmers, neighbors, reporters, and just regular folks wanting to know more toured the shiny new facility and protein-based farm with farmer Dan Carr. He explained how the USDA-approved humane poultry slaughter process works as the group moved through the immaculate and state-of-the-art facility – the only one of its kind in the entire state of Connecticut.

Participants then walked the high grass alongside the solar-powered electric enclosures as Carr described the continuing challenges of getting the farm up and running. These he illustrated with engaging anecdotes, as well as farming science and technique. He waxed about the chickens, composting best practice, the land clearing power of goats, and how much pigs love acorns. This was no dry, abstract classroom lecture. Again, it was a direct experience of local farming and sustainable agriculture. It explored the difficulties, rewards, and costs and benefits of real food from inception to table.

Hands-on learning

Workshops at Plantin' Seeds are focused on teaching skills involved in



Above: An assortment of fresh produce and plantin' seeds on Main Street's creations. Below left: One of the gardens at Pom's Cabin Farm in Falls Village, CT.

food preserving or preparation. On another glistening July evening, Hayhurst assembled a group of families to prepare a campfire dinner at Pom's Cabin Farm.

Out of a clearing in the field rose up a tipi and Hayhurst's enchanted circle of prep stations and campfire. Like a large extended family at Thanksgiving (without the obnoxious relative) it was all hands on deck. Some seasoned and wrapped potatoes and veggies and others assembled blueberry cobbler in sturdy Dutch ovens, with most ingredients courtesy of the farm.

At the same time, Hayhurst coolly supervised the grilling of blueberry-glazed spatchcocked Q Farms chickens. They sizzled on Tuscan grills suspended over glowing embers. As the sun lowered in the luminous

sky the newly-minted campfire chefs tucked into the experience – not just another meal, but an incarnation of our connection to land and food, and a deepening of fellow feeling.



FarmersOnly.com(munity)

Another aspect of Plantin' Seeds honors local farmers, whom McDonald reverently calls "ambassadors of the soil." Monthly farmer dinners are a chance for local farmers to break away from the demands of life on the land to network, advise, share stories, and tips, and you guessed it, talk about the weather.

Dinner conversations move from land access and soil quality to how to build a better chicken coop. Scimeca and Hayhurst agree that farmers in this area are grateful to have a place to go and create bonds between themselves. Although they work independently, local farming is highly collaborative as well.

Organically grown

When one plants a seed, the hope is that it will grow and bear fruit. Plantin' Seeds nurtures its growth in a deliberate, yet serendipitous manner. For McDonald, a three-year plan has involved growing community, extending roots through education, and as they approach year three, making the effort financially sustainable. Right now, the Plantin' Seeds team is looking more deeply into the economics of the small farmer and how their organization can expose the "vagaries of food and finance."

Hayhurst observes, "The magic of Plantin' Seeds is while we have an

overall vision and mission, we don't have an ABC plan for how to get there. We're open to ideas and connections and what individuals literally bring to the table."

Scimeca adds, "We're going down a path, and we don't necessarily have all the answers. But what we do have is a full team effort. There are no individual egos or agendas. We all share a common vision of educating the community about the land and what it yields – all through the direct experience of it."

Plantin' Seeds is an idea whose time has arrived and a thriving example of the fact that if you build it, they will come. ●

Plantin' seeds farm kitchen is located at 99 Main Street, Canaan, CT. It educates through meals and sells local grains on Thursdays from 6 to 9 pm; Saturdays from 8 am to 2 pm; and Sundays from 11 am to 2 pm. No reservations are accepted. For more information, visit their Facebook page, their new website at www.plantinseeds.org, or call (860) 453-4363. To be invited to special events at plantin' seeds farm kitchen or Pom's Cabin Farm you must go in person during opening hours to sign the guest book. This puts you on the invitation list for lectures, workshops, events, and inspiration dinners. Farmers interested in attending farmers-only dinners should contact Plantin' Seeds. All meals and programs require a donation to acknowledge the value of the food, its preparation, and the educational experience.