

A Farm Grows in Brooklyn

An unsustainable writer's life—hunkered down at a desk on the top floor of a Brooklyn brownstone—proved to be the soil in which the farmer within me took root. Out in the street one wintry March evening, pacing and frothing over poverty, injustice, and those politely worded impersonal rejection letters quarterlies dispense the way banks hand out toasters, I came upon a trash bin loaded with basement scraps: water pipes, furring strips, two- by- fours studded with nails that could be straightened out and reused. From these scraps, I saw in a flash of insight, I could construct a seed germination rack. In the gardening catalogs, a deluxe seed starting kit, complete with full- spectrum light and soil heating mats, cost about eight hundred dollars. Which I didn't have. What I did possess—or so I fancied—was a farmer's resourcefulness. Four years earlier, I had started a vegetable garden on the land I had grown up on in Pennsylvania. Road trips in a battered Toyota pickup kept me and my landlord seasonally flush in tomatoes and pesto. I had never given serious thought, until this moment, to expanding into a truck patch. It was an idea so impractical it bordered on fantasy. Most everything I planted—peas, lettuce, carrots, beans, sweet potatoes, beets—got chewed down to nubs by deer and groundhogs. Whether these fur- bearing gourmands were susceptible to primitive superstitions about nightshades, I don't know, but come August, you'd look at my garden and think the only thing I'd planted was tomatoes. The vines strafed the basil and thyme, shaded the sun- loving peppers, and strangled the zucchini, which, only weeks earlier, armed with baseball- bat- sized fruit, had conquered the same ground. As for the tomatoes plumping up on those vines, some looked more like peaches, pears, lemons, or Cinderella pumpkins. There were purple, white, pink, and green orbs of musky softness whose rich, acidic juices colonized the canker sores that throbbled in my mouth until my addiction petered out in September. This jungle of sumptuous, mismatched love apples had its origins in winter days spent poring over the annual yearbook of the Seed Savers Exchange, a phonebooklike compilation of nonhybrid, heirloom seeds offered for a small fee by the gardeners, master and amateur, without whom the tomato would be red for eternity. Cherokee Purple, Green Zebra, Garden Peach, Plum Lemon, Radiator Charlie's Mortgage Lifter. I could not help noticing how these tomatoes responded to me in ways that women, bosses, and literary editors never had. It took five trips to drag my lumber and water pipes up three flights to my apartment. I already had soil heating mats, seeding trays, soil mix, and seed for some sixty tomato varieties. I bought cheap shop lights and hung them from the water pipes an inch above the seeded trays. A week later, my writer's garret was home to three thousand fledgling tomato plants, tightly organized in labeled rows, stretching toward fluorescent bliss. Alas, you can't file away three thousand tomato seedlings like another so- so draft. I had always replenished my writer's war chest with freelance consulting gigs, so to support my tomatoes, I took on a consulting job that required frequent trips to Albany. When

the seedlings outgrew the four trays in which they were crowded together, I spent a weekend potting them up into individual plugs, which meant I now had to accommodate forty plug trays. I bought more shop lights—enough to satisfy the photosynthetic needs of half my seedlings—and put the tomatoes on two twelvehour shifts, half the trays soaking up the fluorescent rays while the other half slept. Since a sliver of light will keep a seedling awake until it keels over of insomnia, I went out to the street and hauled home four refrigerator- sized boxes so the slumbering trays could be placed in the pitch dark.

I was keeping farmer's hours now, especially when I had to catch the 6:00 a.m. train to Albany. Up at four thirty in the morning to put my tomato seedlings through the Chinese fire drill, transferring the sleepers from the boxes to the fluorescent lights, bedding down the ones that had been up all night, watering and inspecting, readjusting my circulation fans, and checking on the chile peppers germinating on the heat mats. Another Chinese fire drill when I got home in the evening. My bedroom was a humid microcosm, bugs helicoptering here and there, the damp smell of tomato musk everywhere.

Once, during a meeting in Albany, I convinced myself I had forgotten to insert the thermometer into the soil of my chile peppers that morning. Horrific scenarios preyed on my imagination: with the thermometer exposed to air, the heat mats would grow hotter and hotter, the chile seedlings would fry, the refrigerator boxes would ignite. I left the meeting early and *flew* home to New York City, convinced I would have to rescue my seedlings from a burning brownstone.

As it turned out, the thermometer was lodged snugly in the soil, where it belonged.

City life agreed with my tomatoes. Unharried by the elements, they had their first brush with adversity on an April day when I carried them up to the roof. The real sun was no forty- watt bulb. The seedlings nearly wilted to death. For two weeks, I spent every free moment weaning them from the fluorescent lights, hauling them onto the roof, then back down when the wilting started.

Adaptation to the sun brought with it a burst of growth: my seedlings needed larger containers. The rooftop was big enough to hold ninety trays, but I needed to construct cold frames to protect the seedlings from the unstable April weather. My landlord intervened when I found a trash bin full of windows for my cold frames. This was a landlord who, during lean months, had kindly accepted tomatoes and zucchini in lieu of rent. Concerned, and for good reason, that the windows of my cold frames would take flight in the wind, he evicted my tomatoes.

Two trips in my Toyota pickup brought all of the seedlings back to my boyhood home in Pennsylvania, to Eckerton, where I laid claim to a couple of acres of shaley ground and tracked down an old high- school classmate who managed to start up the Ford 8N tractor that had sat unused for fifteen years. The only labor I could afford was pro bono, so I convinced all of my friends who were doctors and lawyers that it would be fun to come out to the

country for a weekend and help transplant two acres of seedlings with garden trowels. From there, my first season as a farmer unfolded as if the inverse of Murphy's law was at work. Although I had no irrigation, the clouds delivered almost every week. When buyers at the local produce auction refused to bid on my gangly, multicolored misfits, Greenmarket in New York City offered me space. And so, back to that beautiful mosaic of a city they went, these upstarts with the quirky immigrant names: Black Krim, Extra Eros Zlatolaska, German Johnson, Aunt Ruby's German Green, Zapotec Pleated, Rose de Berne.

The rest of that first season is a frenetic blur of pulling weeds and picking tomatoes and begging for people—my girlfriend, mother, father, friends, neighbors, anyone—to help me pick tomatoes.

And hawking tomatoes. Pulling into Union Square Greenmarket in the morning, always late from having picked until dark,

I would brace myself for the relentless questions. Because I was practically subsisting on the tomatoes myself—there was no time

for a sit-down meal—the descriptions came literally off the tip of my tongue: Yellow Brandywine's nectarine-rich sweetness, Cherokee Purple's winy acidity, Green Zebra's salty tang, White Wonder's appeasing mildness. Trusting more to their own instincts, the chefs grabbed empty tomato boxes, climbed aboard the truck, and rummaged away in an urban version of pick-your-own. When I was splitting at the seams with abundance, the overloaded Toyota blew a clutch and I had to rent a box truck, which the tomatoes ably filled. The truck buzzed with chefs.

City life agreed with my tomatoes. I sold out every time.

As the season wore on, though, I began to feel toward this lucky crop the way a father might feel toward an onerous brood of children, wearily anticipating the day the last spoiled brat gets hauled off to college. I remember the Friday evening my girlfriend and I came into the city to deliver tomatoes because I wasn't coming to market until Monday, and by then I would have *two* full truckloads. We were muddy and worn out from picking all day and we had not eaten since breakfast. There were the added aggravations you would expect on the most humid evening of summer:

a grocer who waited up for me and then grouched about how "tomatoes are in the dog house." Two parking tickets. A *maitre d'* who physically blocked my passage when I tried to sneak a delivery through the dining room during peak service. Restaurants had yet to discover how a reputation for seasonal purity might be clinched by having a filthy farmer waltz fifty pounds of just-picked tomatoes between crowded tables and into the kitchen.

On the way uptown with the final delivery, we got snagged in gridlocked traffic, and I felt a tremendous urge to pull a Jackson Pollock with my remaining tomatoes, to yank the stems out like handgrenade pins and pulp the white van wedged in front of me.

"To the dog house with all of them," I announced. "I will never grow tomatoes again!" When we finally made it to the last drop-off, at Restaurant Daniel, chef de cuisine Alex Lee helped us carry the tomatoes into the kitchen. When Alex introduced us to Daniel Boulud, Daniel looked us over and promptly said, "Let me give you something to eat."

“A quick bite to eat sounds great,” I said. I was thinking of all the tomatoes waiting to be picked at the crack of dawn.

“Here, there is no such thing as a quick bite to eat,” Daniel explained as a table was set up in the kitchen for us. We must have been the most bedraggled, bordering-on-homeless specimens on the Upper East Side of Manhattan that night, and here was Daniel Boulud offering us a coveted seat. I sat down and rose again, thinking this time of my truck parked at an expiring meter. “Don’t worry,” Alex said, heading outside with some quarters.

My farmer’s appetite rendered me callous to the task of committing to memory the courses served to us that evening. There were seven in all. Each course featured a paired wine and a kitchen staffer who offered a table-side explanation of the provenance of the ingredients in the dish. And the bread! I mopped up every drop of every sauce until every plate reflected my face with its week’s growth of whiskers.

I do remember a clear, lemon-tinted soup made from the freshly squeezed juices of Taxi tomatoes. At the bottom of the bowl, a tiny wild Mexican tomato glimmered like a fathomless ruby.

Hey! Those were my tomatoes!

Never again? I say that every October. And every March, I drag out the Dumpster-inspired germination rack that moved to Pennsylvania with me. For twelve years now, I’ve made a living from tomatoes. It’s not a bad life. I still do not own a farm, but I have my own tractor.

And that landlord who gave my tomatoes the boot? He works for me.

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