

Tairwa' - Knoll Farms

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By Barbara Kobsar
8-15-2001
TIMES CORRESPONDENT

FOODIES AND EAST BAY chefs headed for nearby farms recently, getting in touch with the produce that makes their kitchens hum.



LESLEY STILES, CONTRA COSTA CERTIFIED FARMERS MARKETS, TO THE TIMES
PETER CHASTAIN, left, chef of Prima in Walnut Creek, gets a lesson from farmer Rick Knoll of Brentwood. Knoll's figs and apricots are gold to chefs.

Organized by Contra Costa Certified Farmers Markets, the tour was a snapshot of what has made California the pioneer in cooking for decades: a strong connection between chef and farmer. It also was an education on how local farmers operate, and evidence that our farmers markets are filled with the best produce money can buy.

The first stop was Knoll farms in Brentwood, whose incredible figs and apricots are so prized that they are often listed by name on savvy restaurant menus. Rick and Kristie Knoll were waiting for our small group when we arrived at their 10-acre organic spread. We meandered by the rows of rosemary, arugula and tomatoes. But the fig trees were the most impressive -- branches laden with the ripening second crop of Adriatic and black mission figs.

As we made our way through the trees and took cover in the shade of their sprawling branches, Rick Knoll explained his philosophy of farming in the 21st century, later summed up by tour organizer Lesley Stiles.

"Rick's ultimate goal in life is to make Earth and humans work together," said Stiles. "His farm is his petri dish."

Knoll's methods are designed to increase yields and efficiency at his small family farm. That might involve brewing up a special fertilizer using volcanic ash, or simply utilizing every bit of land he has available. In the space between apricot trees, for instance, the Knolls grow artichokes and rosemary (producing as much as 200 pounds of rosemary a week; even the stripped branches are sold to restaurants as skewers).

It's expensive to go organic, but Kristie Knoll says it's better to "pay as you go," rather than leaving farming to agribusinesses and dealing with the environmental consequences later.

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Green Garlic Sprouts on Bay Area Menus

Janet Fletcher, Chronicle Staff Writer

Wednesday, April 1, 1998

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We've embraced baby greens, sought out baby beets and succumbed to baby squash. What's next -- baby garlic?

Indeed. At Knoll Organic Farms in Brentwood, Rick and Kristie Knoll are shipping 600 to 800 pounds a week this spring of immature --or "green" -- garlic, a crop they've been growing and touting for 15 years.

This year, everyone's listening. Spring restaurant menus abound with green garlic-perfumed dishes, and local markets are betting that shoppers will snap up the underage alliums.

Resembling scallions with their white and pale-green shafts and strappy green leaves, green garlic delivers a gloved punch -- an unmistakable garlic flavor without the mature bulb's heat. At this scallionlike stage, you can add it to soups, pasta sauces, vegetable preparations, pizza toppings and stews.

"We use it liberally," says Christopher Fernandez, chef-owner of Crescent Park Grill in Palo Alto. "It freshens things up."

If left in the ground, the green garlic base gradually swells into the familiar bulb, which then separates into paper-wrapped cloves by early summer. Some growers harvest the crop at an in-between stage known as spring garlic; at that point, the stalk has toughened and the creamy bulb is the prize, mild and easy to use as it hasn't separated yet into cloves.

But the green garlic of early spring is perhaps even more versatile, both as a seasoning and as a vegetable. After the tough green leaves are removed, the shafts can be minced, sliced or used whole. At Sent Sovi in Saratoga, chef David Kinch oven-braises whole green garlic in salted water with bay leaves, olive oil and butter, and serves it as a side dish for pork. He saves the aromatic braising liquid and whisks it into mayonnaise to make a flavorful aioli. Fernandez also makes a green garlic mayonnaise, using chopped shoots that have been sauteed first; he pairs it with wood-oven-roasted steelhead and spring vegetables. And he adds masses of chopped green garlic to a pork ragu served over pasta, claiming that it adds freshness and depth. Several local chefs are making green garlic soup this spring, typically with a water or chicken stock base and potato for thickener. Naomi Crawford, sous-chef at the Slow Club in San Francisco, reports brisk sales for her version, which she enriches with cream and seasons with nutmeg. Kinch floats goat cheese-stuffed gougères (savory cream puffs) on top of his green garlic soup, which has become a signature dish at the restaurant.

At San Francisco's Universal Cafe, green garlic flavors both potato soup and

mashed potatoes. Sauteed green garlic also tops a pizza with mozzarella, Yukon Gold potatoes and goat cheese.

Most recipes call for sauteing the garlic first to mellow its character, but the Knolls swear by it raw. They put a bowl of thinly sliced green garlic on the dinner table for stirring into soup or spooning over oil-drizzled toast. One Chez Panisse chef, who buys dozens of pounds of their green garlic each week, tells Kristie she is obscenely heavy-handed with it, which she cheerfully acknowledges.

“It's an antibiotic,” claims Rick. “The more you eat raw, the more it helps your alimentary canal.” He is still searching for scientific literature to buttress this view, but in the meantime, his own experience supports it. Neither he nor Kristie, he says, has been sick in 20 years.

On many farms, the green garlic shipped to market is simply the thinnings from the summer bulb-garlic crop. But the Knolls take another approach. They plant expressly for green garlic and have selected varieties that are especially tender and tasty at that stage. (In fact, says Rick, these varieties don't produce satisfactory bulbs.) They've also modified their growing practices to encourage each plant to produce a long, white neck -- in some cases almost a foot long.

Cooks frustrated with the dry, sprouting cloves in most bulb garlic at this time of year will find green garlic a welcome alternative. Available in markets now through May, the aromatic shoots signal the arrival of spring as surely as daffodils.

THE BEST WAY TO STORE IT

Because it's so moist, green garlic is much more perishable than dried bulb garlic. Rick Knoll, of Knoll Organic Farms in Brentwood, recommends treating it like a flower: Leave the roots on, stand the shoots up in a glass of water in the refrigerator, and cover them with a plastic bag.

Alternatively, keep them in a plastic bag in the vegetable bin with a damp paper towel in the bag. They should last at least a week.

The white and pale-green shaft is entirely useable, although some cooks like to remove an outer layer or two if it feels tough.

SOURCES

The following stores frequently carry Knoll Organic Farm's green garlic. Call first to verify availability.

-Berkeley Bowl, 2020 Oregon, Berkeley; (510) 843-6929

--Cal-Mart Supermarket, 3585 California St. (near Spruce Street), San Francisco; (415) 751-3516

--Market Hall Produce, 5655 College Ave,
Oakland, (510) 601-8208

--Good Nature Grocery, 1359 North Main St.,
Walnut Creek, (925) 939-5444

--Mollie Stone's, various locations around the Bay Area

--Monterey Market, 1550 Hopkins St. (at California Street),
Berkeley; (510) 526-6042

-- Rainbow Grocery, 1745 Folsom St. (at 13th Street),
San Francisco; (415) 863-0620

-- Real Food Co., various locations

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When beans turn to greens

Janet Fletcher, Chronicle Staff Writer

Wednesday, April 20, 2002

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Fava beans have soared in popularity in recent years, making fans far beyond their original Italian-American audience. Now one enterprising California farmer is harvesting fava greens, the leafy, non-fruiting part of the plant. Kristie Knoll of Knoll Organic Farms in Brentwood says her husband Rick was "just out grazing one day and thought, 'Whoa, this is pretty good.' "

Uncooked, the greens taste nutty, with a hint of the bean flavor, a quality that dissipates somewhat when the leaves are cooked. Although Kristie Knoll enjoys the greens raw, in salads, most chefs are wilting them quickly in a hot skillet or blanching them first.

They're a popular tapa at Cesar in Berkeley, flavored with onion and crisp bacon. At Caffe Venezia in Berkeley, they're stir-fried, then tossed with fresh fava beans and lamb braising juices and served with lamb shanks. At Prima in Walnut Creek, a small salad of wilted fava greens and Blue Lake beans accompanies fresh fish. Farallon in San Francisco uses them raw and cooked as a fish garnish. At Firefly in San Francisco, they're sliced and added to risotto at the

last minute or stir-fried to accompany sturgeon.

The novel greens, akin to pea shoots, will be in local restaurants for weeks to come. Home cooks can buy them directly from the wholesaler.

VegiWorks, 2000 McKinnon Avenue (at Rankin), Building 428,
Unit D, San Francisco; (415) 643-8686.

-- Janet Fletcher

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Beyond organic

Wisdom from the Garden of Eatin'

By Melissa Kaman
TIMES CORRESPONDENT
Wed, Mar. 20, 2002

AFTER 17 YEARS of certified organic farming, Rick and Kristie Knoll of Knoll Farms in Brentwood have decided to end their relationship with the official concept of organic.

This will be the first year since 1983 that they have not registered with California Certified Organic Farmers. Nor will they renew their organic registration with the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

Why would a small, eco-friendly farm disassociate with a growing, seemingly good, trend? Because the Knolls see beyond organics -- to a brighter future.

The Brentwood couple has abandoned the familiar organic "brand" in favor of a label that more fully reflects their principles. They call it Tairwá, a phonetic translation of the French word terroir, meaning "the essence of place." It's a term familiar to French wine drinkers; referring to the earthy characteristics that grapes pick up from soil and climate.

Accordingly, any produce with the Tairwá label will reflect the farm on which it was grown. An increasingly corporate organic industry, the

Knolls say, puts little or no emphasis on producing food that is local and seasonal.

"We have become dissatisfied with the organic movement, because there has been a lowering of the bar," says Kristie Knoll. "The industry has begun to do what is easy rather than what is going to create the most nutritious food.

"Why get fruit from South America or Asia when it is grown right here in California? People have traveled all over the world -- it's natural to want to re-create that food on special occasions," she says. "But in general, people need to eat more naturally and more seasonally."

The Knolls bought their 10-acre farm 23 years ago, and have since nurtured it from an alfalfa field to a teeming and diverse patchwork of organic culinary herbs, specialty greens, seasonal vegetables and fruits.

When Rick Knoll sees nearby farmers abandoning money-losing plants, he makes room for them on his farm. Last week he was planting Fuji apple trees with intern Thako Harris.

"Asian apples have put California apples out of business, because the Asian market can do it so much cheaper," Kristie Knoll says. "But the more distance between the farm and the table, the more nutrition and flavor you lose."

A New York Times Magazine article published in May by the author of the No. 1 Times best seller "The Botany of Desire" put into print what the Knolls had been thinking for years. It inspired the Knolls to turn Tairwá into reality. Michael Pollan's article, "Naturally," gave an unblinking, in-depth look at America's organic industry.

Organics' rapid takeover of supermarket shelf space has been its undoing, Pollan said. "This sort of growth has attracted the attention of the very agribusiness corporations to which the organic movement once presented a radical alternative and often a scalding critique," he wrote.

The Knolls say that by focusing on terroir and using the Tairwá label, they will give their customers -- now mostly restaurants -- confidence in the integrity of their produce.

"Our focus is the soil. It always has been and always will be. The soil is the foundation -- its viability and its health are paramount.

"All things require proper materials for maintenance and repair. The old adage that 'you are what you eat' has great meaning. Give your body the raw materials it needs for maintenance and repair, and it will serve you well for a long time. Soil is the same, only better: It has no finite life span and, with proper nourishment, continues to get better and better.

"Because we give our soil the raw materials with which to regenerate itself, our produce has a life force, which provides high nutritional value."

Oliveto restaurant in Oakland has been buying from Knoll Farms for five years. Co-owner Bob Klein says Oliveto will continue to support the Knolls and their new label. "They are beyond organic," Klein says.

"They are drawing a distinction between themselves and something that has become watered down."

Others, such as organic farmer Marcia Litsinger, say sects like Tairwá pose a danger of watering down a strong, established movement.

"If everyone starts branching off and doing their own thing, we are just going to confuse the consumers more. We need to work for change underneath the organic label."

Brian Leahy is president of California Certified Organic Farmers, a nonprofit organization that has been certifying farms since 1973. About 80 percent of California's organic farms are certified with the CCOF. In addition to complying with the USDA's definition of organic, the CCOF has its own set of standards -- some of the strictest in the industry. But Leahy says that farmers who already have their customers trust needn't worry about certification.

"The USDA owns the word organic," he says. "But if you are going on trust, why subject yourself to the USDA regulations?"

The CCOF defines organic as a rejection of inappropriate technology, of pesticides on food, what Leahy calls "toxic farming."

They encourage the use of soil-building techniques to build and maintain the environment, and using materials known to be good for the soil. "When people see an organic label they think they are supporting small farms," Leahy says.

But organic, he says, does not mean small farm, and does not mean locally produced. "You can buy an organic Twinkie today," he says. The CCOF has plans to create a new label in the near future, one that truly does represent the small farmer. The label will identify small producers who believe in sustainable agriculture, "biological growing," and who cannot or will not comply with government standards.

The money that the Knolls save from not reregistering will most likely be spent on the production and maintenance of the Tairwá label. They plan to include a small brochure with their produce that explains their beliefs and methods.

Kristie says they are unsure whether Tairwá will attract new customers but hopes that continued support from respected restaurants, such as Chez Panisse in Berkeley, will give Tairwá credibility. Peter Chastain, chef of Prima Ristorante in Walnut Creek, is attracted to the Knoll's exceptional produce. Fava beans are not yet in season, but he is using leafy fava greens as wrappers for a number of items.

Support system

The Knolls already have the support of San Francisco's top produce companies. VegiWorks sells to top East Bay restaurants, such as OnoMazé in Walnut Creek. In their weekly newsletter to restaurants, they specifically list what can be had from Knoll Farms. Here are some snippets from last week's newsletter:

- Teen-age-size mixed chard greens, marvelous flavor
- Bunched mixed radishes (Icicle, Red, White and Striped), tender
- Horseradish root, fresh dug
- Cardoon leaves, young
- Rosemary for skewers
- Apricot and fig wood for grilling

The listings finish with: "We encourage you to support this farm; they are one of the best!"

John San Agustin, director of shipping for VegiWorks, has worked with the Knolls for about 10 years. "Rick and Kristie are one of the forefathers of the organic movement," he says. "Their philosophy and spirit are true to that movement."

San Agustin agrees that organic certification has begun to bend and sway to larger organic growers, often to the frustration and disillusionment of the small farmer. "Small farmers are people of their word," he says. "A handshake still means something to them."

San Agustin says he has already heard of farmers contemplating a break with certification in favor of their own local organizations.

"It's in the air. Organic growers are following their hearts and minds. The Knolls are creating a lead that others will follow."

"Rick (Knoll) is metaphysically tuned in to the spirit of the land. He reminds me of the American Indians, who worked with the land and allowed nature to happen."

Greenleaf is a much larger produce company that works with 2,000 growers throughout the year. Andy Powning, the self-described heart, soul and ambassador of Greenleaf, has done business with the Knolls for 20 years. He says he loves their contrarian nature but encourages them to be cautious about abandoning organic.

"I err on the side of caution. I wouldn't want this to hurt their business," he says. Powning also recognizes that small growers are becoming disillusioned with the organic certification process. "The pendulum has swung too far in favor of large organic farms. It is hard for the small-scale farmer to compete, and they are the lifeblood of interesting new vegetables coming up."

Despite his trepidation, Powning says Greenleaf will vigorously support Tairwá.

"We have a strong history with the Knolls. We are committed to making this work and consider ourselves partners."

Participate, purchase

Anyone can be a partner to the principles behind Tairwá.

"Shop at farmers markets and get as close to the source as possible," Kristie Knoll says. Theoretically farmers shouldn't exist. People should grow their own food. Familiarize yourself with small family farms and support them -- in supermarkets and farmers markets.

One way to participate is by becoming part of community-supported agriculture, or CSA -- a nationwide network that helps connect consumers with local growers (www.localharvest.org).

Every week Kristie boxes up produce for local residents. She includes recipes for unfamiliar-but-seasonal items. She also includes Web sites and literature for the conscientious consumer.

"In today's capitalistic democracy, one's strongest vote is cast when one shops," she says. "The way in which people collectively spend their money determines the course of commerce."

Kristie still encourages consumers to buy certified organic products. "Farming without chemicals -- with nature -- rather than trying to browbeat it into submission is important."

An adjacent lot of land to the Knolls is brown and barren. It stands in stark contrast to their land, which is alive and diverse, a feast for the eyes.

"Top soil is disappearing at an alarming rate," Kristie says. "Its erosion is one of the gravest concerns for present-day farmers."

Kristie's natural approach echoes a cartoon posted on her door: "God put me on earth to accomplish a certain number of things. Right now I am so far behind I will never die."

Immortal, no, but inspirational, yes.

"We believe strongly that it's time to forge ahead to the next level, beyond the "O"

word -- to develop a marketing strategy for our unique products and, perhaps, to lead the way for other family farmers who wish to remain true to the original tenets of our industry."

The Knolls put their money where their mouth is; Kristie would rather spend money at a great restaurant than on nice clothing or furniture.

So the money those restaurants spend on Knoll produce often gets recycled.

"Eating well is our one major extravagance," Kristie says.

NOSH WITH THE KNOLLS

Farm Fresh Times columnist Barbara Kobsar and Times Food editor Nicholas Boer invite you to come celebrate the arrival of spring at Rick and Kristie Knoll's farm in Brentwood (12510 Byron Highway). Walnut Creek chefs Peter Chastain of Prima Ristorante and Kelly Degala of OnoMazé; JOHN DOE of Wente Vineyards Restaurant in Livermore; Danville chefs King Wong of 301 Bistro and Fred Halpert of Brava Terrace; Andy Powning of Greenleaf Produce; Melissa Kaman of Oliveto; Peter Charitou of Sweeney's Grill & Bar in Brentwood. Postino of Lafayette and Chez Panisse of Berkeley will also be on hand. Be ready to party at 11 a.m. on Saturday. It's also a celebration of the 20th year of Contra Costa Certified Farmers Markets. Attendance is free but limited. Call 925-943-8105. www.knollorganics.com.

Melissa Kaman is an assistant manager at Oliveto restaurant in Oakland. This story was written with Times Food editor Nicholas Boer.

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Figs - Food for the Gods

Tara Duggan, San Francisco Chronicle
Sunday, July 29, 2001
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It's 7:30 a.m. on a Saturday in late June and the Ferry Plaza Farmers' Market is packed. There's a particular buzz around the Knoll Farms stand, with shoppers eager to snap up the last of the farm's organic figs. Then they'll be gone - at least

until August, when a second, larger crop comes in.

Farmer Rick Knoll cuts open a few green Adriatics and black missions, both with pink centers so ripe and moist they quiver as they fall off the knife. With elbows jamming all around, I grab a sample and take a bite. It's the first thing I've put into my mouth that morning, even before coffee, and the sugar hits my brain like an illicit substance.

"It's like legal candy," Knoll had said in an earlier telephone interview.

I had no idea.

Figs first came to California in 1769, when Father Junipero Serra planted them in Mission San Diego. They became a commercial crop in 1900, and California is still the only state to grow them commercially. But most of the fruit is dried - about 30 million pounds a year.

When Knoll and his wife, Kristie, started growing figs more than 20 years ago, fresh figs were a specialty, found mostly in Italian stores and some restaurants, he says. It's only in the last decade or so that they've had a resurgence as a fresh fruit.

Fragility accounts for much of their rarity. Ripe figs are too soft to travel far. Knoll Farms is only a two-hour drive from the Bay Area, and there are smaller growers nearby. Otherwise, fresh figs mostly come from the Fresno area.

Figs originated in western Asia and made their way to the Mediterranean in prehistoric times. They became one of the very first cultivated fruit trees, probably as early as 4000 B.C. in Egypt or Arabia. They were worshiped wherever they went, it seemed, often playing symbolic roles relating to sensuality and fertility. The East Indian fig tree, or banyan, is sacred in India, and interwoven with Indian mythology.

In ancient Greece, dried figs were a major part of the daily diet of rich and poor. Associated with Demeter, the Greek goddess of agriculture and fertility, the fig became a symbol of the fall harvest. Romans considered the fruit a gift from Bacchus, the god of wine and all things sensual. The fruit was given as an offering to Bacchus at the frenzied, orgiastic festivals in his honor.

Though mentioned often in the Bible, figs are probably most famously associated with the story of Creation. When Adam and Eve have to leave the Garden of Eden, they cover themselves with fig leaves. Some have even argued that the forbidden fruit was actually a fig, not an apple.

All of the sexual connotations around figs mesh with the fascinating birds- and-bees ritual traditionally used to cultivate them. Called caprification, the process is named for the caprifig, the original native fig tree.

Technically, figs are not a fruit but an inverted flower, with more than 1, 000 blossoms, or seeds, within each fig. The caprifig has both male and female

flowers, whereas other varieties often only have female flowers. Tiny fig wasps that live inside the flowers take care of the fertilization problem.

When a female wasp leaves her home fig to go lay her eggs, her wings get coated with pollen from the male flowers inside it. She then flies to another fig tree, bringing the pollen with her and fertilizing the new fig.

Early growers learned to place branches of the caprifig tree near the trees they wanted to cultivate. Caprification is still practiced today for some varieties, but others - such as the black mission, the kadota and the Adriatic - don't need wasps for cultivation.

These varieties have two crops per year. Locally, the first crop, from June to early July, has a shorter season and is not as bountiful as the second crop.

That starts in August and can run into November, depending on the weather.

When they're in season, figs create a clamoring among some Bay Area restaurant chefs and diners. Besides their obvious applications in sweet dishes, chefs often turn to them as a foil for savory foods, especially grilled and roasted meats. Chefs from as far away as Manhattan also order fig wood for their wood-fired ovens from Knoll Farms, as well as fresh fig leaves.

"They're definitely a signal that summer is here," says Charles Downing, executive chef at Spiedini in Walnut Creek. "Figs have a great depth of flavor and richness - almost a glycerine-y mouth feel. Other fruits can be delicious but don't have the richness or the meatiness of the figs."

Like clockwork, when the weather starts getting warm, customers begin calling in to ask if his spiedini di fici is on the menu yet, Downing says.

For this signature antipasto, Downing stuffs fresh Brown Turkey or Adriatics with Gorgonzola dolce and anoints them with extra-virgin olive oil. He roasts them in a fig wood fired oven, then partners the warm figs with twirled prosciutto rosettes, fresh Zante currants and deep-fried fig leaves, which provide a tannic, slightly bitter edge.

Chef Amaryll Schwertner of Stars in San Francisco serves roasted figs with grilled squab and purslane. Before roasting the figs, she drizzles them with lavender honey and red wine and tosses them with thyme sprigs and orange zest (see recipe at right). In the hot-as-Hades wood oven, the fruits acquire a caramelized crust that Schwertner describes as "almost like a very fine creme brulee top," which, she points out, is very nice to bite through to the moist fig beneath.

There's no doubt these modern-day figs could serve as offerings to the gods.

Figs in the Market

The season's second crop of fresh, local figs are just starting to come into markets. It should peak in September and last into October or November.

The ripest, best-tasting figs are very soft and not always the prettiest; look for those with skin that is beginning to shrivel and crack. They are very perishable, so plan to eat them within a day or two, or refrigerate them for a few days. Trim off the stems, which sometimes taste pithy.

These figs are generally available in Northern California, especially at produce or farmers' markets.

Black mission. This fig is named for the Spanish missions where figs were first grown in California. Purple-black on the outside and pink inside, black missions have a heady flavor. Grown widely in California, this is the variety generally used in Fig Newtons.

Brown Turkey. These fat, ruddy-brown figs are honey-colored or pink inside.

Calimyrna. Called Smyrna in the Mediterranean, this ancient variety is one of the most common in California and is often dried. It can range from yellow to green.

Kadota. Look for ones that are green on the outside and white or amber inside.

White Adriatic. Green-skinned, with a shimmering purple or pink interior, these are particularly high in sugar.

Caramelized Figs

Stars executive chef Amaryll Schwertner roasts figs in a wood-fired oven and serves them next to grilled squab. At home, you can use a very hot oven or barbecue and serve them with any kind of grilled fowl or even meat dishes. The figs won't get quite as caramelized as they do in the wood-fired oven, but they still taste delicious. So do the crispy thyme branches, which you can eat, too.

Ingredients: 1 pint ripe (but not too soft) black mission or Adriatic figs, Sea salt to taste, Cracked black pepper to taste, 6 thyme branches, 6 strips of organic orange zest, Pinch of sugar or lavender honey, A few drops of red wine...

Instructions:

Preheat the oven to 500° or prepare a hot charcoal grill.

Trim the stems on the figs and halve the figs lengthwise. Place them in a bowl and sprinkle lightly with the sea salt and pepper. Gently toss in the thyme branches, orange zest, sugar and wine. Let sit for a few minutes.

Place the figs cut-side up on a greased baking sheet or oiled grill basket, and place the thyme across the top. Discard the orange zest. Roast or grill for 5 to 8 minutes, until the skins are bubbly and the insides are molten. If using an oven, turn the

heat to broil and place the figs near the broiler element for a few minutes to brown. Be careful they do not burn.

Remove the figs from the heat source and let the crusts harden slightly. Serve with the crispy thyme branches. Serves 6.

PER SERVING: 30 calories, 0 protein, 7 g carbohydrate, 0 fat, 0 cholesterol, 0 sodium, 1 g fiber.

Tara Duggan is a Chronicle staff writer in the Food section. E-mail her at tduggan@sfchronicle.com.

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Figs' Plucky Nature Comes at at Price

Janet Fletcher, Chronicle Staff Writer

Wednesday, September 1, 1999

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If you've ever wondered why fresh figs are so expensive, listen to Rick Knoll describe how they're picked.

``The Kadotas and Adriatics will eat your cuticles," says the grower, proprietor of Knoll Organic Farms in Brentwood. The milky latex that oozes from a fig stem when pinched ``is like Compound W. A drop of milk from a green fig will dissolve a wart."

Knoll says his harvesters either wear surgical gloves or tape their fingers like football players. His own fingers are so damaged he can't pick any longer.

To protect his crew, Knoll has designed a small harvesting knife so workers no longer have to pinch the fruit off the stems. The knife slows down the harvesting but saves the hands of laborers who may have to pick figs almost every day for three months.

Knoll's five acres of figs include Kadotas, Adriatics, Missions and Brown Turkeys, all capable of producing two harvests a year in Brentwood's warm climate. The

early crop, harvested in June, tends to be lighter and of shorter duration than the late summer crop. "It's just enough figs to make you crazy," says Kristie Knoll, Rick's wife. "We never have enough for everybody."

By September, the Knolls are picking and packing the second crop for restaurant customers such as Oliveto, Flea Street Cafe, Chez Panisse and Black Cat, and for retailers like Real Food, Mollie Stone's and Rainbow Grocery. The Knolls' luscious, oozy figs are so popular at San Francisco's Ferry Plaza Farmers' Market -- even at \$3.50 a pound -- that shoppers get angry when the couple skips a week. The elderly woman who helps them at their booth says she has been accosted on BART by customers wanting to know where the figs were.

The Knoll fruit wins fans because it is picked when ripe instead of when still firm enough to ship. At their ripest, Knoll figs may be 25 percent sugar and have a shelf life of only three or four days. Plump and prone to squashing, these fragile figs demand coddling from field to table.

At the farmers' market, Kristie Knoll tears her figs in half and prods novices to take a taste. "People don't want to touch something that's kind of soft," she says, but she eventually gets them to cradle a Brown Turkey in their palm and to squeeze gently to judge ripeness.

"A lot of people look for a fig that's too beautiful," she says. "They see slits in the skin and think, 'Pass on that.' But that's what you should be looking for. That means it's ready to go."

The Brown Turkey fig has a thin, light brown skin and flesh that ranges from soft pink to raspberry. The Adriatic and Kadota are both green-skinned figs, but the Kadota flesh is typically honey-colored while the Adriatic's is pink-to-strawberry. The Kadota produces a drop of honeydew on the bottom when ripe; the Adriatic gets thinner-skinned, almost translucent.

In contrast, Mission figs have purplish-black skin and red flesh, and the uglier they are, the better. "They get a little semi-dried looking, kinda shriveled and wrinkly," says Kristie. "You rip those in half and eat them and, oh man, they're great."

To keep dead-ripe figs longer than a day, refrigerate them. If the figs are still a little firm, store at room temperature and they will continue to ripen. (Mission figs won't ripen off the tree but the other types will, Rick says.)

For the grower, the biggest challenge in getting figs to market is saving them from the starlings and gophers. The European starling is "out of control here," Rick says, and it has few predators. At least the native birds work on only one fig at a time; the starlings peck a hole in all of them. Gophers, for their part, can eat a young tree in an afternoon and kill a big tree if given enough time. Some gophers eventually succumb to dogs, owls, snakes or traps, but not before decimating a tree.

Occasionally Kristie Knoll polls local restaurants to learn how they're using her figs. Her recent discoveries -- roasted Adriatic figs with duck (Chez Panisse Cafe,

Berkeley); roasted fig-walnut bruschetta with Cambozola cheese (Flea Street Cafe, Menlo Park); red dandelion and arugula salad with figs (Oliveto, Oakland); and grilled Brown Turkey figs with aged goat cheese wrapped in fig leaves and grilled (Black Cat, San Francisco). Her husband likes to smear a ripe Adriatic fig on a toasted English muffin. "You can't tell it from strawberry jam," he says.

If warm weather prevails, the Knolls' fig season can last into October and beyond. "One year we delivered figs to Real Food for Thanksgiving," Kristie recalls. "We always hope for that. But by the middle of October, unless we have an amazing Indian summer, we'll be on the down side of the bell curve."

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From The March 2002 Issue of Natural Foods Merchandiser

Biodynamic Agriculture Blends The Scientific And Spiritual

Thomas Garvey May

Rick Knoll knew that biodynamic agriculture worked from his first experience with the farming method.

One autumn, he planted a cow's horn packed with manure in the soil, the fermentation step in the system's instructions for making a root stimulant. But he'd planted what is known as biodynamic preparation 500 in the wrong spot in relation to his fig trees. In the spring, when he dug up the horn to continue making the preparation, roots from the nearby grove had wrapped and penetrated the horn, sucking it dry.

To the uninitiated, biodynamics can sound like voodoo or the esoteric rituals of a cult. But to Knoll, who earned a Ph.D. in organic chemistry from the University of California at Irvine, the system for optimizing soil fertility made perfect sense. The preparations were a way of ratcheting up the soil's potential, revving the microbes until "they were ready to go out and conquer the world," Knoll says.

Fertilizers made strictly from farm-derived inputs are just one part of biodynamics, a system developed in 1924 by Rudolph Steiner, an Austrian scientist and philosopher. The method parallels organic farming in many ways—especially with regard to some biological practices, such as cover crops and compost—but it is set apart by many as well, most notably its association with the spiritual and acknowledgement of cosmic forces.

Perhaps it's these spiritual and cosmic aspects that have kept biodynamics on the fringes of the natural foods world. Or maybe it's because the method isn't widely

practiced or promoted. But added-value ecolabels, such as biodynamic, may get a boost from organic's acceptance in the mainstream. Plus, there is credible research to prove that Steiner's methods, though based on spiritual principles, help to produce some of the best soil of any agricultural system known.

Born in what is now Croatia in 1861, Steiner was a classically trained scientist and a renowned philosopher. By the early 1920s, he was often approached for his opinion on enigmatic topics. His innovative theories had already laid the foundations for the Waldorf school system and a series of lectures on anatomy still read by medical students.

His eight agriculture lectures, later published in a book called *Spiritual Foundations for the Renewal of Agriculture*, were in response to a group of farmers who came to him for advice. Before the chemical practices developed during the 20th century were considered the norm, some farmers were worried about the impact these fertilizers and pesticides would have. They had already begun to notice a decline in their livestock, soil and seed fertility.

The theories behind the chemical farming movement disregard the roles of plants, soil and animals, says Knoll, who farms 10 acres in Brentwood, Calif., 60 miles east of San Francisco. "One of the problems with modern farming is that it puts man at the center of the whole equation."

Steiner took a holistic approach to the subject—from his perspective, the entire farm was one organism. The biodynamic method he conceived is described as having two interwoven parts, says Harald Hoven, farmer and teacher at Steiner College in Fairbanks, Calif. Crop yield and quality are influenced by two groups of environmental factors: earthly and cosmic, or biological and dynamic.

"So there are two areas," Hoven says. "The horizontal consists of working in the community and with the farmland, and the vertical deals with how to keep the plant in touch with cosmic forces."

The basic ecological or horizontal principle of biodynamics is to view the farm as a self-contained entity. Biodynamic farmers emphasize integrating crops and livestock, recycling nutrients, maintaining soil, and heeding the health and well-being of crops and animals; even the farmer is part of the whole. "No inputs from outside would be needed in an ideal system," Hoven says. "All the fertility should be generated on the farm."

"The farm is 23 years old, and it has evolved into an organism," Knoll says of his farm. He has a role in the system, but doesn't see himself as the controller. "We consider ourselves just one of the species of the ecosystem."

Because the farm is alive, "dead" materials, such as chemical fertilizers, should never be used. This aspect of biodynamics is similar to organic agriculture. However, the specific preparations used as alternatives to synthetics distinguish the method from organic farming.

Steiner described the nine biodynamic preparations, or magic potions as Knoll

calls them, to enhance the soil fertility. They consist of a combination of mineral, plant or animal manure extracts, which are fermented for a period of time, then diluted and stirred in a procedure called dynamization. The final product is applied in small amounts to compost, soil or directly to plants. The preparations are numbered 500 to 508, and each has a different purpose, ranging from root stimulant to growth regulator. There's even a preparation—made from the silica-rich horsetail plant—used as a spray to suppress fungal disease in plants.

The preparations have a microbiological basis, but the rituals involved in creating and applying them are part of the cosmic or dynamic aspects of biodynamics. This is where the system differs most dramatically from organic.

"One of the main differences is that biodynamics is basically a spiritual activity," says Anne Mendenhall, director of the Demeter Association, the sole certifier of biodynamic farming, with U.S. offices in Aurora, N.Y. "It serves as a learning path for the farmer to delve more deeply into nature and the mysteries of growth."

In all of Steiner's work, he tried to bridge the gap between science and spirituality. Recognizing the celestial influences on plant growth is part of biodynamic awareness; subtle energy forces affect biological systems. Another manifestation of this belief is the biodynamic calendar. Lunar and astrological cycles are charted and can play a role in timing biodynamic practices, such as when to make the preparations, cultivate or plant.

Teachers and scholars of Steiner's work emphasize this practice. The planting calendar was part of his effort to raise awareness of cosmic forces, Hoven says. "You have to work together with the sun and the season. You cannot try to fool them."

But Mendenhall, who visits many farms every year, says that planting by the biodynamic calendar isn't always practical, nor is it part of the standards that Demeter certifies. "Farmers rarely, if ever, have that option," she says. "You have to hurry and get your crop in during the window of opportunity, and if you wait for any astrological aspects, you're apt to be left holding the bag of seed in your hand."

The Demeter Association was founded in Europe in the 1920s to foster and encourage biodynamics by certifying growers. The certification process is similar to that of organics because Demeter requires record keeping and annual inspections. But Mendenhall says the Demeter seal is tougher to obtain because there are so many more aspects to consider with biodynamics. A farmer starting from scratch faces the same three-year prohibition on chemical use as an organic farmer does, but then there's a two-year period during which farmers must show full use of biodynamic preparations and methods. One year into the two-year conversion, but only after the three-year chemical prohibition, the farm's produce can be labeled as "In-Conversion to Demeter," Mendenhall says.

Some biodynamic farmers don't believe the certification process or codification of Steiner's teachings is true to the philosopher's intentions. The lectures were observations about the lack of intuitive work on farms, Knoll says. Steiner saw the

farm as an individual, and as such each farm should be a running experiment, an evolution.

"I don't think he'd like the cult standing he has obtained," Knoll says. "He wasn't into rules. His observations were about being intuitive."

Knoll's farm isn't certified by the Demeter Association, but he has been certified organic for more than a decade. It produces year-round—crops ranging from white stone fruit and heirloom vegetables to culinary and medicinal herbs—and Knoll sells only at markets where a premium is placed on quality. He sees no added value in the biodynamic label, and instead is working on developing a program and certification system to promote locally grown produce.

But Chuck Beedy of the Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association in San Francisco has a different opinion. He suggests that the biodynamic label will gain more economic viability now that the federal government is involved with organic. For some consumers, organic means more than just an agriculture system that doesn't harm the environment. Added attributes, such as locally grown or family-farmed, are often associated with the organic label.

Although on many organic farms that is the case, the National Organic Program dictates nothing of the kind. But with biodynamics, many of those attributes are required for certification. "People who sought out organic as a movement or a philosophy, not simply [an agricultural] method, might look to biodynamic as remaining truer to that ideal," Beedy says.

Beedy and the association have begun efforts to get the word out about biodynamics. But his challenge is that the words don't have as great an impact as the produce itself. "You need to get it into people's hands, so they can [see and taste] the difference."

For farmers looking to move into biodynamics, recent studies show that some of Steiner's theories have scientific validity. Lynn Carpenter-Boggs and John Reaganold, researchers at Washington State University in Spokane, Wash., found that biodynamic preparations improved soil quality when compared with conventional fields that weren't treated. They also found that biodynamically treated compost pits had higher temperatures, matured faster and had higher nitrate levels than control piles.

But if spiritual fulfillment and soil enhancement aren't enough motivation, the system's efficiency reaps financial rewards as well. Knoll says he spends much of his time deciding what not to do on his farm and lets his land decide. And apparently his land makes good decisions: Last year his crop averaged just less than \$40,000 gross per acre. "That's way off the charts," Knoll says. "Even in a lot of organic circles."



Government cleans up organic's image

By Melissa Kaman

CONTRA COSTA TIMES CORRESPONDENT

Reach Melissa Kaman at melkaman@earthlink.net.

AS OF MONDAY, the federal government officially owns the word "organic." The USDA's new guidelines went into effect Oct. 21, setting in place a strict nationwide definition of what it means to be organic.

"The new organic rules codify organic as a national standard," says Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation. "They present the consumer with a true alternative to an agro-industrial system that shows little regard for environmental concerns."

Before Monday, a product sold anywhere in the United States could claim organic with as little as 1 percent organic ingredients and could contain genetically modified organisms. In California, organic growers were required to register with the state. But official organic certification, through agencies such as California Certified Organic Farmers, was entirely optional (there was no regulatory oversight on the word "organic"). Now, previously registered organic growers, if continuing to claim organic, must certify through the CCOF, which now complies fully with USDA regulations.

Under the new guidelines, any food product using the word organic, whether grown in the United States or imported from other countries, must be free of GMOs, radiation and most conventional pesticides (the National Organic Standards Board has approved a small number of these pesticides for organic use). To be stamped organic, it must contain at least 95 percent organic ingredients. Organic meat, fish, chicken eggs and dairy products must come from animals fed a 100 percent organic diet. Beef and chicken must be raised under organic management, with no antibiotics or growth hormones. The use of petroleum-based or sewage-based fertilizers on the land on which the animals roam is forbidden.

The official USDA organic seal will appear only on products with at least 95 percent organic ingredients. The term "100 percent organic" assures that all of a product's content is certified organic. A product still may be labeled "made with organic" if it contains at least 70 percent certified organic ingredients. Products containing less than 70 percent organic may identify particular ingredients as organic, but only on the product's ingredients list.

The seal, accompanied by the appropriate phrasing, may appear stamped on a

box, wrapper, or above a display, indicating which fruits, vegetables or meats are USDA-certified. Certification agencies, such as California Certified Organic Farmers, are in charge of enforcing these regulations.

The word "organic," if used without complying with the national standard, can result in a fine of \$10,000. Farmers with income of less than \$5,000 per year are excluded from the certification process but still must comply with the rules and are subject to fines. There is aid available to farmers who can't afford the certification process.

The new standards, according to George Chartier, public affairs specialist with the USDA, are industry-created and -regulated -- a topic of debate and discussion among industry professionals -- and were not imposed by government. They represent the third and final draft released by the National Organic Standards Board (composed of scientists, environmentalists, organic farmers, handlers, processors, consumer interest representatives and a certifying agency). "Any decisions made came and will come from comment from the industry itself," says Chartier.

The certification process is entirely voluntary, but farms that choose not to complete certification may not use the word "organic" in marketing their produce.

Masaki Asaoka, produce manager at Star Grocery in Oakland, says he must rename "organic" produce "pesticide-free" if those farmers aren't certified through the USDA. Because organic usually costs more than conventional produce, some farmers will not reap full benefits from retail sales.

Organics has a growth rate of 20 percent per year -- the fastest-growing sector of agriculture. Many see these new standards as a victory for organics, but some small-scale local organic farmers are skeptical. They see organics as a way of life -- a method of farming that listens to the land and fosters biodiversity.

SUSTAINABLE

"You'd think that 'industrial organic' was an oxymoron, but it's not anymore," says Kendra Johnson, co-manager of Moraga Gardens, a 1 1/2-acre farm in Moraga that grows produce for the community, local retail and restaurants. "Organic used to mean locally grown, ecologically appropriate," Johnson said. "It's come to mean something totally different. If someone asks me if we're organic, I'll say yes, but it's not something I'm proud of anymore.

"Huge corporate farms don't allow you to get close to and listen to the land," Johnson said. "The new legislation is swallowing up the concept of organic. If the term organic is going to be appropriated by large-scale farming, there needs to be a new term."

Johnson looks to Rick and Kristie Knoll of Knoll Farm in Brentwood for inspiration. This past spring, the Knolls decided to renounce the organic label in favor of their own. Tairwa, a play on the French word *terroir*, or essence of place, represents the Knolls' opposition to a movement they believe is moving further

and further away from its original ideals. While they can't (and won't) legally call themselves organic, their most loyal customers (including some of the best restaurants in the Bay Area) continue to support Knoll Farm, calling their strategy "beyond organic."

"It's not a perfect rule," says Bob Scowcroft of the Organic Farming Research Foundation, who admits these farmers have valid concerns. "But the process for change is built in."

Maria Rodale, founding editor of Organic Style magazine and granddaughter of organic pioneer J.I. Rodale, who started Organic Gardening magazine and coined the term "organic," says these new organic laws will help to achieve the local, sustainable vision these farmers have.

"These laws establish a base of trust and consistency. A lot of customers are confused, and these rules will help them make better choices," Rodale says.

"It took us 60 years to get here. We can't be obsessed with perfection," she says. "Otherwise, we'll eliminate any possible progress. We've got to stick together."

Rodale points out that organics still only account for 1 percent of the nation's agriculture. She'd like to see it soar to 50 percent or higher. "When there are more organic farmers, it will be easier for people to buy locally," she says.

But farmer Johnson is worried that the word "organic" is coming to mean "pesticide-free," which, in her mind, covers just one component of what organic farming is all about. The popularity of the organic movement, Johnson believes, is as much about personal health as it is about protecting the environment.

Regardless of what motivates people to buy organic, the benefits for the Earth are realized, according to Rodale. She says most research shows that people's interest in organic is primarily selfish, with taste and personal health taking precedence over environmental concerns. So marketing efforts should be designed in that context.

"We have to take human nature into account," she says.

Sustainable farming -- a practice focusing on the continual health and productivity of the soil -- is not a necessary aim of organics under the new definition, and is difficult to achieve on a large scale. But sustainability is of paramount importance to farmers like the Knolls and Johnson.

Rodale applauds farmers going "beyond organic," but says that for the nation to go in that direction, "there would have to be a fundamental shift in how we live, shop and eat." Enacting these new laws, Rodale says, "helps us get there."

Johnson isn't against the industrial-organic movement per se. She says more acres of organic, even if defined by the new national standard, are better than the chemical-laden alternative. Still, she says, "It takes the spotlight off of small, local farmers, and away from the original ideas of the organic movement."

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Cooking Fresh: Fig farmers gives varieties a new infusion of energy

By Laurel Miller - CONTRIBUTOR

"A couple of figs in the morning, when you're tired, or run down, or hungover, is almost like a blood transfusion," says farmer Rick Knoll.

Huh. And to think I've spent all this time supporting my neighborhood coffeehouse.

"They're highly nutritious, high in iron and calcium," continues Knoll. "If I'm dragging, I eat a few and get a real energy surge."

Knoll, who owns Knoll Farm in Brentwood along with his wife Kristie, is a visionary, one of the pioneers of sustainable farming, in addition to being famous for his figs.

Although the Knolls farm organically and biodynamically, which involves farming in harmony with the land's ecosystem, they are trying to avoid being pigeonholed as "organic."

"We're one of the original organic farms that are now marketing our product under our own label, "Tairwa," he says. "With the increasing growth and corporatization of organic farms, the growing methods are becoming less sustainable and ecology-minded, so we decided we needed to distinguish ourselves from those types of operations."

The Knoll's new label, "Tairwa," is a play on the French term, terroir, which roughly translates as "sense of place." It's a term used to describe how the unique characteristics of a particular area's soil, climate and indigenous plants can affect the food grown or raised there. For example, cows that graze on the salt-tinged grasses along the Sonoma coast will produce milk that not only tastes specific to that breed, but also to that region and season.

The Knolls grow a variety of fruit and vegetables on their small Brentwood farm, but figs and green garlic are their trademarks.

"The fig thing came about by accident," says Knoll. "I used to grow a lot of peaches and nectarines, but there were a lot of stonefruit growers in the area, so I felt I needed to distinguish myself, and I decided to tear out all my trees. It was a dumb move, but it worked out because we decided to grow as many outrageous varieties of figs as possible."

Knoll currently grows six types of figs, but he doesn't plant new varieties on a whim.

"Fig trees will bear fruit after just three years. But when we try a variety we find interesting, we get its genetic material, grow a tree, experiment with seeing what its seasonality is, test the fruit out on our customers, then start grafting root stock and starting new trees. The whole process takes around 10 years."

If it sounds as though Knoll is a bit of a mad scientist, perhaps it's because he holds two separate doctorates in organic chemistry and agricultural ecology. Still, he is as laid-back and down-to-earth as the farm he has created.

"I don't like categorizing. We're not 'organic.' We're just the essence of this place, this soil on this patch of land we farm on."

Knoll nurtures his fig trees by doing the opposite of what most farmers do.

"We intentionally plant and add to what's already there - native bunch grasses, alfalfa, red clover. Some people call them weeds. But keeping the diversity of the soil really high by keeping lots of root systems going and adding to the microbial life in the soil, well, I think it makes for great crops," he says.

"People have a tendency to hoe out everything and denude the area they're planting, but you need to create an environment that's hospitable, to keep root systems active and healthy."

Knoll's fig season begins in late May with his two varieties of Adriatic figs. Weather permitting, the season extends to Thanksgiving with, appropriately enough, Brown Turkey figs.

Brown Turkeys are a large Turkish fig with a rosy interior. They are more juicy than the average fig, which Knoll says makes them good for baking because they hold their shape well and the sugars in the juice caramelize as they cook.

The ubiquitous Black Mission fig, the "Fig Newton fig," jokes Knoll, came to California along with the Spanish missionaries. They are black-skinned, with reddish flesh.

"They're the only variety that freezes well," says Knoll. "After you take them out and they've tempered a bit, they have the flavor and consistency of fig sherbet. They're bad for cooking with, though, because they just melt down."

Kadota figs have a thick, green skin with a salmon-colored interior. They are syrupy sweet and are best used for canning or paired with prosciutto, the saltiness of which provides a good contrast to the sweet flesh.

"Kristie likes to make a fig vinaigrette with our Kadotas," Knoll says. "She uses a food processor to blend up the figs, balsamic vinegar, extra-virgin olive oil, and a bit of herb such as basil."

Of his Adriatic figs, Knoll explains that every region of Sicily has its own specific variety. "They usually grow later in the season, but in our microclimate, they're early producers. They're thin-skinned, green with a reddish tinge, and fragile. The interior is very strawberry-like. The best way to enjoy them is to get a good baguette, some almond butter, and smear on some fresh figs and make a sandwich."

Knoll's current favorite - perhaps because he's still experimenting with the trees - is Melissa.

"There's a nice bit of folklore to the fig," he says, "You know the Allman Brothers song, 'Melissa?' Well, it's about a woman who was as sweet as this fig. It looks like a smaller, rounder, Brown Turkey, with white dots. It's got a custardy, salmon-colored flesh. It's outstanding for eating fresh or with creme fraiche and mint, or on pancakes."

I like my figs in a salad of baby greens, walnuts, good blue cheese and tossed with a sherry or balsamic vinaigrette. Or I'll put them on toasted walnut levain bread layered with prosciutto and drizzled with honey.

But however I choose to enjoy them, I don't think I'm ready to give up my morning caffeine surge just yet.

- Knoll Farm figs are available at Ferry Plaza farmers' market in San Francisco, Monterey Market, Mollie Stone's, Berkeley Bowl, and Rainbow Grocery. The following farms also sell figs: Guru Ram Das Orchards at the Berkeley farmers' market; and Terra Firma Farm at the Berkeley and Marin farmers' markets.

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This column is a service of the Berkeley Farmers' Market and Eating Fresh Publications (www.eatingfresh.com) publishers of "Cooking Fresh from the Bay Area."

The Berkeley Farmers' Market is open 2-7 p.m. Tuesdays at Derby Street and MLK Jr. Way, and 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays at Center Street and MLK Jr. Way. Call (510) 548-3333 or visit www.ecologycenter.org

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FRESH FROM THE FARM

Pea greens offer fun, fresh entree options

HEY, FOODIES! I heard y'all were happy getting recipes last month, so here are a few more this month. I'll focus on a single item that those Knolls call pea greens.

Others call them pea shoots. A Boston customer calls them pea tendrils. Asians call them dou miao. I've always pronounced the Asian version "dow mew," but

looking at the way my Asian seed catalog spells it, I'm certain my pronunciation is incorrect. Ah! The bliss of cluelessness. Not to worry: My shortcomings in the pronunciation department are, I hope, offset by my talents in the preparation department.

Pea greens are the tender end shoots of the pea plant. They often have curly little tendrils that give them a whimsical, almost fairy-tale look. They are delectable greens, with a pea-like flavor -- go figure. Moreover, they're quite "nutrilicious" -- my own term for "nutritious and delicious" all rolled into one.

As is often the case with the culinary arts, the uses and applications of same are limited only by one's imagination. The many ways to prepare pea greens run the gamut from very simple to complex. I rarely have the time to get too complex, so the recipes you'll see here are "sorta complex" at most. In all my recipes, you can assume that all ingredients used are organically grown, unless I just cannot get my hands on an organically grown product. This is especially true for soy products (tofu, tempeh, etc.), grains and any meat, poultry or dairy products.

At their simplest, pea greens can be gently rinsed and eaten fresh, which makes them a quick and tasty snack. They are also wonderful -- again, fresh -- as additions to salads, where their tender crunchiness and pea essence are a delight. Served atop a bed of brown basmati rice, which smells like popcorn when it's cooking, pea greens partner with the rice to form a complete protein.

The Brentwood Raley's at Sand Creek and the bypass and the Discovery Bay Safeway at Hwy. 4 and Bixler carry certified organic California brown basmati rice grown by Lundberg Family Farms. Those Lundbergs - Eldon, Wendell, Harlan and Homer - use Certified Renewable Energy for their headquarters and production facilities. So while you help curb global warming by supporting a farm that uses renewable energy, you'll be regaled by the wonderful aroma of popcorn as the rice cooks.

But I digress. So you've got your pea greens atop your rice. What is the protocol for the "polite" consumption of this dish? Well, you can pick the Pea Greens up with your fingers and "snack" them like you would fresh off the plant, or you can toss them gently with the rice and wilt them a bit, which is also very nice. You may be obliged to eat them with your fork after tossing and wilting them.

If you need a little salt to add some flavor, you can use San-J Organic Whole Soybean Wheat-Free Soy Sauce, also known as tamari. Eden Organic makes the same sort of wheat-free tamari sauce, too. Each of these tamari sauces is free of MSG (monosodium glutamate) and should be available at the Raley's or Safeway mentioned above.

You can chop pea greens coarsely and add them to cooked dishes -- pasta, rice, quinoa, polenta, soups, eggs, beans, whatever -- just prior to serving.

You can use one tablespoon of oil -- sesame for an Asian flair, olive for an Italian flair -- in a 12-inch skillet over medium-low heat. Allow the oil to get warm; then tilt the pan back and forth to get the oil to cover the bottom of the pan. Add a chopped

onion and a snug-fitting lid. Slice the cylindrical shafts of two THE Green Garlic stalks into one-inch pieces; add to the skillet; simmer covered until translucent. If you have some baby carrots, baby green beans, or other baby veggies that you enjoy in a half-cooked, crunchy state, toss 'em in here. Cross-cut the remaining garlic (the greens) into thin ribbons while baby veggies cook lightly. After five minutes, add a half pound of pea greens and THE Green Garlic ribbons to the skillet. Toss lightly with the rest of the ingredients in skillet until the pea greens are wilted. Serve immediately over rice, pasta, polenta, quinoa, or the like.

My favorite pea greens recipe is tofu-sesame pea greens. Start as above with one tablespoon oil -- I opt for sesame oil for this recipe -- chopped onion and one-inch pieces of THE Green Garlic shafts. While the alliums simmer gently, cut a quarter pound of tofu, chicken, turkey, beef, lamb, or the like into half-inch cubes. Toss well with 1 to 2 tablespoons tamari sauce. When the alliums are translucent, add cubes and brown gently over medium heat. Note that the alliums may caramelize slightly, which will make them even sweeter. While the cubes brown, toast quarter-inch-thick slices of your favorite bread and set them aside. Cross-cut the remaining garlic (the greens) into thin ribbons.

When the cubes are well browned, add one pound of pea greens and THE Green Garlic ribbons to the skillet and toss gently until the pea greens are wilted. Turn the contents of skillet on to a serving plate and sprinkle generously with toasted sesame seeds. Spread crostini (toasted bread) with roasted sesame tahini (roasted, ground sesame seeds; the sesame equivalent of peanut butter). It's nice with sake.

You can pick up the Knoll products mentioned above at the Sand Creek Raley's in Brentwood. Look for 'em in the specialty produce section.

Get your tickets now for the 2006 BALT Fun(d)raiser Dinner to be held on May 20 at Tamayo Family Vineyards. Log on to www.brownpapertickets.com/event/3390. This is an event you don't wanna miss. Can't afford tickets or wanna volunteer to help? E-mail kristie@knollorganics.com. Knoll Farms is at 12510 Byron Highway Brentwood, CA 94513-4233 or call 925-634-5959.

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