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31 October 2005

The Chef's Farmer: Peter Jacobsen



I only know "Robert40" (his username) virtually, but I owe him a debt of gratitude. It was on Tuesday that he posted at a food forum we frequent, asking "Who is **Peter Jacobsen**?" He'd done some research, and in Googling, had produced a list of dishes at [French Laundry](#), which you may or may not know is generally regarded at one of the best restaurants in the world. You may or may not know that **Thomas Keller**, the chef, is the subject of one of my favorite food-themed books ever, *The Soul of a Chef*, written by [Michael Ruhlman](#), who is (not surprisingly) one of my favorite writers. (Certain foodies will know Ruhlman to be a buddy of another favorite writer, **Anthony Bourdain**, whose Dr. Jekyll and Mister Foul Mouth make me certain he's got a heavy Gemini influence in his birth chart.) Ruhlman's work with Keller resulted in their collaboration on *The French Laundry Cookbook*, famed for its labor-intensive devotion to producing dishes with incredible flavors.

Like Manresa in Los Gatos, when you go to French Laundry, you are advised to do the chef's tasting. Thomas Keller is devoted to bringing forth the essence of his ingredients, and to bold and flavor combinations, and he is famed for his resourcefulness in finding the best purveyors of the ingredients he seeks.



If you know of the reputation of French



Laundry, you might also know how expensive it is to eat there—I don't assume that my readers do or don't know. A *prix fixe* menu before tax, tip, and wine, is \$175. And every single person I know who's eaten there says it's worth it. I have not been yet.

Armed with a smattering of information about Peter Jacobsen, I found a connection and an e-mail address. I sent forth a query, with links to this blog, saying:



"I wonder if you might allow me to visit and photograph your property.

"I can assure you of several things:

- 1) I only take pictures that show the beauty of what you are doing and growing; I don't take or post ugly photographs;
- 2) I am not on any kind of mission to obtain state secrets from you; I have a black thumb and all arcane knowledge and practices are completely lost on me;
- 3) My mission in life is to turn people on to small farms. I want anyone who sees my work to say, "Where's my pretty farm? Where's my pretty farmer?"

"Please check out my blog and see what I do.

"Also, I often travel with our little grandson, Logan. I try to bring him to farms with me, because it's a good influence on him. I can further assure you that he's just a delightful and happy little toddler, and he generally charms the pants off anyone who meets him. If WE might be allowed to visit you, that would be wonderful."

And lo and behold, Dr. Jacobsen (he's a dentist) invited me to the farm for the upcoming weekend. I got so giddy when I got his e-mail the following morning that my stomach felt squeaky. The stars lined up yesterday, and so I headed up to Napa Valley with **Cynthia Geske**, tomato grower extraordinaire, and little Logan in her back seat. Several playings of a Raffi CD later, and we

pulled into the driveway of Jacobsen Orchards, as it is designated for CCOF. Peter had "warned" me: "the farm isn't very beautiful this time of year with the leaves falling and such," but he was mistaken.



Napa Valley enjoys the kind of autumn foliage that we on the central coast do not. The trees were turning gold and orange: fallen peach leaves formed perfect circles under the boughs. Ripe persimmons and quince added more

gold and orange, and the perfect blue sky, dotted with a few puffy clouds, made the colors brilliant. Peter came out under the arbor to greet us: a tall and handsome man with salt-and-pepper hair and beautiful, twinkling eyes. We were made welcome instantly, and Logan led the way, so excited to be out of his carseat was he. He made a beeline for one of the tractors, and danced around the work shed near our car.

Robert40 had produced a list of items found on various food blogs and elsewhere, all things grown by Peter and Gwen Jacobsen:

- Green Gage Plums
- Pole Beans
- Blackberries
- Spring Garlic
- Figs
- Red Haven Peaches
- Swiss Chard
- Flowering Quince
- Mint
- Clear Almonds
- Pecans
- Pumpkins
- Wonderberries
- Summer Squash
- Cardoons
- Ratte Potatoes

We saw many of these things, though the season for some had passed. The predominant visual was the persimmon trees, which were laden with brilliant fruits and leaves.



(Pictured at right, the biggest persimmon I've ever seen...and remember that Peter is a tall man with big hands.)



Yet because of the mild weather, Logan managed to locate a handful of blackberries on bushes that were dotted with shriveled, dry berry skeletons. These he smeared into his little mouth: he got dirtier yesterday than I've ever seen him. This is a happy thing.



We started at the driveway, which is located at six o'clock on the property, and worked our way clockwise around. Though the farm is a mere 1.3 acres, it feels bigger because it's so diverse. The orchard is ringed with vegetable and

herb beds; at this time of year, Peter anticipates putting in cover crops over a number of beds. Meanwhile, **chard**, **Savoy cabbage**, **Napa cabbage**, **cardoons**, **green garlic**, a few tomatoes (he grows only five kinds, including **Early Girls** and **Sun Golds**), and other vegetables are thriving.

For the last six years, the Jacobsens have sold exclusively to French Laundry, essentially only for the French Laundry chefs. They arrive daily, pick what they want for the day's menu, look to see what is perfectly ripe so they can plan for the next day, and then head back to the restaurant nearby. We did not see them during our two-hour visit, but I do plan to return and meet them.

Because the only visitors to the farm are chefs and food writers, this farm tour was far and away the most educational for me. Peter has a well-educated palate, and he is able to speak about the distinct flavors of each thing he picked. We tasted **croshes** (pronounced "crones"), also known as "knotroot," which I never knew about. Cynthia and I were both willing to taste them straight out of the ground: what's a little dirt? They were delicious, not unlike kohlrabi, and even more delicious when washed off. (Pity the poor *commis* at French Laundry, whose job it is to peel these intricate shapes before they're cooked.)





We slowly worked our way around the perimeter of the farm: stopping to taste everything Peter picked... red peppers and golden ones, **arugula** and **sunchokes**. Being something akin to a

'**supertaster**' is no picnic for me sometimes: the arugula burned a little. Peter, too, had his own preferences, citing "texture issues" when peeling a Hachiya persimmon.

He didn't think I would enjoy eating the raw stalk of a **cardoon**, fearing it would be too bitter, but I enjoyed it, as did Logan, who gnawed on a stalk until he found the berries. The flavor was somewhere between an artichoke and celery; I'd love to grow some in our garden next year. The cardoon is a stunning plant visually, much like an artichoke with its spiny, grey-green leaves. (See picture above at left.)



Then we came to the figs, and I can only say that I was stunned. Cynthia, too. Figs in general are a little too sweet for me, but I'd never had a **Panache**, a **Celestial**, or a **Violette de Bordeaux fig** before. The **Violette de Bordeaux**, pictured here, is ripe when its stem looks like its neck is broken, and the fruit is plump and dark. Some bites hinted at the possibility of being fermented, but I am certain they were not past their prime. They just tasted incredibly *ripe*.

(I regret not having taken more notes, but having a camera in one hand and a toddler in the other often preclude whipping out my Moleskine notebook.)

When she tasted these figs, Cynthia said, "I almost, *almost*, uttered the phrase, 'This is better than chocolate,' but I stopped myself." In Cynthia's world, that would be blasphemy.

Likewise, the contrast in flavor with the Panache figs was marked. They are lighter, sweeter, and fruitier,



somehow. The **Violette de Bordeaux** were like Sophia Loren, the Panaches more like Meryl Streep.



And so it happened that two new fig devotees were born: wander into a fig orchard in October and see what happens to you.



Next we came to the prunes, of which I only got a smidgen. Peter advised being open to the flavor: I'm sure prune prejudice abounds in the culinary world. Having experienced the miracles of what a great chef can do paying homage to classic flavors, I brought all my awareness to the flavors filling my mouth as I bit into the gooey fleshed fruit. I could taste all its sweetness, and at the same time, the earthy and smoky residual flavor from the skin, which left almost a chocolate feeling in my throat. I could imagine all kinds of wonderful things to do with this flavor and texture. It made me feel dreamy, like a sip of wine.

We came to the persimmons then, back where we started. I have never been a fan, having "texture issues," myself: I find the grainy texture repellent. But we had both a Fuyu (the crisper variety) and a Hachiya, pictured here, and both were just fabulous. Who knew? (For persimmon fans: try Bob's technique. He freezes them, then grates them, so they're a bit like a sorbet.)



We tasted fennel and smelled Kaffir Lime. We saw pumpkins being saved for seed selection. And then we meandered to the next yard over.



Adjoining the Jacobsens' property is land belonging to Darci and Doug H., neighbors who let Peter "sharecrop" their land. There we encountered **three different kinds of apples**: the **Black Arkansas** (I didn't get a picture, as now I was holding a baby *and* an apple) may have just shot to the top of the charts. I do not like mealy apples. I like an apple to bite back. The Black Arkansas had both firm flesh and

intense flavor, and now I need to know where I can get more.

Our next discovery was the **wonderberry**, a member of the deadly nightshade whose relatives include tomatoes, eggplants, tomatillos, hot peppers, and Brugmansia (angel's trumpet, a.k.a.



datura). The berries have a very unusual flavor. It was neither currant nor blueberry, but somewhere in between, to me.

Logan, of course, is all about the berry, and Peter had to lead him away, being that nightshades and toddlers are something with which we exercise caution.



We also saw the new delivery of **grape pomace**, gleaned from the crush earlier this season. The smell was indescribable: somewhere between incense and grappa and fruit and wood. Cynthia persuaded me to photograph

it. I thought it was beautiful, too.

Though we feared we were intruding on his valuable time, Peter insisted on taking to visit his neighbor, Amy G., whose tomatoes and stone fruits went to Dean and Deluca. She and Cynthia went off together in a pink cloud of girly tomato sparkles while I was singing Logan to sleep. Dr. Jacobsen then carried Logan for about a half an hour while I took a few more photos. (I am reluctant to publish Amy's last name, as she might be listed in the public directory.)

As the beautiful October light set over Amy's gardens, we headed back to Cynthia's car with Logan still asleep. It was just an amazing afternoon, in every regard, and I felt so honored and happy and touched by the whole experience.



We'll be returning--Cynthia forgot to bring tomatoes!

.....

We had two more stops in Napa Valley: Dean and Deluca for lunch, and then an hour in the gardens at Copia, where their tomatoes are like the Playmates at the Playboy Mansion. (I'm convinced they mulch with twenty-dollar bills, personally.) But all that can wait for another blog entry.

This one is solely for Peter Jacobsen, with gratitude for the education, the joy, and for the kindness to us, especially to Logan.

A note: the location of the property is not public, as the Jacobsens do not need or seek publicity. I call him a "secret farmer" to respect the privacy that he prefers to maintain. Casual visits are not available.

You can read a little more about French Laundry and its purveyors in [this article in *The Wine News*](#), from the summer of 2000.

You can see more photographs, with minimal captions, of Jacobsen Orchard [here](#).

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: "The whole secret of life is to be interested in one thing profoundly and in a thousand things well." —Horace Walpole

Thanks for visiting. (And thanks, Peter, for letting us visit.)

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Sounds like you had a lovely day at Jacobsen Farm. Brilliant photos, as always. I can't believe he said the farm isn't looking "very beautiful" now - what must it look like when he thinks it's looking good? Those *croshes* sure look interesting, and I'd love to have tasted the figs! Ahhh, it must be good to be Thomas Keller!

Posted by: [Brett](#) | [31 October 2005 at 09:36 AM](#)

Tana,

I never doubted for a moment you were the only one who could do this extraordinary farm the justice it deserves with your beautiful photos and wonderful written description.

Dr Peter Jacobsen,

Your attention to detail and passion for your craft is without a doubt comparable to Chef Keller's himself.

Thank you for allowing Tana a glimpse of your amazing farm and letting her share it with us all.

Inspiring story is a understatement.

Robert Rymarz

AKA Robert40

Posted by: [Robert R.](#) | [31 October 2005 at 10:45 AM](#)

What an exquisite way to spend a day. I think I'd rather visit the farm than the restaurant. Thanks for letting us see the place through your lens.

G.

Posted by: [Greg](#) | [31 October 2005 at 05:18 PM](#)

The visit was delightful, Peter was wonderful, the persimmons were fabulous. My favorite photo you didn't post, Tana, the persimmons hanging from the arbor! Everyone needs to go take a look at the rest of the photos. Really special. And now that I've had my chocolate, I would REALLY like to have that fig, since I can get chocolate any old place, but a fig like THAT one.... priceless!

Posted by: [cynthia](#) | [31 October 2005 at 09:37 PM](#)

Thank you, Brett and Greg, for seeing what I see.

Cynthia, I will add some photos to the "Beautiful Farms" gallery,

okay? And will include the hanging persimmons one.

Thanks for stopping in, all of you.

Posted by: [Tana](#) | [01 November 2005 at 10:37 AM](#)

What a wonderful set of re-experiences.

I'd like to re-try figs and persimmons, having has sweetness/ texture issues with both previously. I really like the grated frozen fruit trick.

Posted by: [McAuliflower](#) | [01 November 2005 at 01:06 PM](#)

I'm still trying to scrape my jaw up off the carpet. I'm agape.

Stunning!

("Texture issues." Hah!)

Posted by: [cookiecrumb](#) | [01 November 2005 at 03:47 PM](#)

Beautiful photo of a ripe Hachiya, it's rare to see them so.

And the frozen trick is an interesting one because "freezing" is a way of "cooking" and so this helps with speeding up the ripening process as well as creating a gorgeous delicious texture.

Thank you for being on this mission to visit farms, it's a passion of mine and I feel privileged to have so many amazing farmers in my life.

Posted by: [shuna fish](#) | [07 November 2005 at 02:22 PM](#)

An inspiring post...I'm so hungry now!

Posted by: [stephen](#) | [08 November 2005 at 03:49 PM](#)

If you want more fig experience, I have about 250 varieties in San Diego.

Posted by: [Jon Verdick](#) | [04 December 2006 at 07:31 PM](#)

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