

FIELDS OF DREAMS Immigrants and cooks alike reap program's rich rewards

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Body

Up in the rich, black soil of New York's Orange County - where farmers have grown onions for generations - Martin Rodriguez and his family are producing some of this city's most exotic greenmarket goodies.

In addition to brilliant-orange squash blossoms, tangles of succulent purslane and rare chilies, he cultivates plants that don't yet have English names - like pipiche (a long, skinny cousin of cilantro), alache (a triangular-leaved Mexican spinach) and two kinds of the rare herb papalo.

A year ago these fields, now RodriMex Farm, were barren, and Rodriguez eked out a living between construction jobs and deliveries. Then he joined the New Farmer Development Program, a joint project of Greenmarket and Cornell University Cooperative Extension that helps immigrants find their way back to the land.

Now Rodriguez sells his crops - many rarely seen outside of Mexico, the country he left nearly 16 years ago - at city green-markets, both to the culinarily curious and throngs of Hispanic New Yorkers seeking flavors of home.

"It's heavy work," says Rodriguez, who commutes to his Hudson Valley fields from his home in Brooklyn, "but I love it."

SAVING TWO CULTURES

Helping city immigrants like Rodriguez is a central goal of New Farmer Development Program, says its director, Kate Granger. But the truth is, she says, we also need the new farmers.

Like the rest of the country, New York is losing farms (1,500 since 1994, according to the New York Agricultural Statistics Service), with the biggest fatalities being small farms that sell directly to the public. "There has been so much demand," says Granger of the city's requests to farmers for more greenmarkets, "but they can't keep up."

In 2001, says John Ameroso of Cornell Cooperative Extension, the New Farmer program was launched to help fill the void. Targeting Latin American immigrants with agricultural backgrounds, he says, the state tapped into a population with farming skill and the willingness to work the long hours the vocation requires. "If you don't have that drive," says Ameroso, "you're not going to make it."

FEEDING THE MULTITUDES

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So far, more than 75 new farmers have proven they can. After taking the program's 14-week training course, some sell traditional crops to the public or restaurants; some intern for other farms, learning how to raise goats; one has a booming egg business, and others, like RodriMex, have created thriving industries.

Thanks to the program, these families make a livelihood doing what they love. Our country gains needed family farms, our city more options for fresh, local foods.

As for our culinary culture - we'll have to wait and see. But when pipiche-encrusted sea bass shows up on the menu, you'll know where it came from.

STUFFED SQUASH BLOSSOMS

Serves 4 as an appetizer

Adapted from Maria Alvarez, New Farmer Development Program

One of RodriMex Farm's most popular crops is squash blossoms, or flor de calabaza. Maria Alvarez, a field agent for the New Farmer program, recommends them stuffed with cheese and lightly pan-fried. They're also good in quesadillas.

16 squash blossoms

1 cup queso fresco (or feta)

1 large egg, beaten

2 tablespoons milk, beaten into eggs

1 1/2 cups flour

4 tablespoons olive oil

Gently wash blossoms. Slice open along one side and remove pistils. Place a heaping teaspoon of cheese into each, twist ends to seal. Dip blossoms into egg mixture, coat with flour and set aside. Repeat with remaining blossoms. Heat oil in a heavy skillet. Add blossoms, frying on one side golden-brown. Turn and cook other side. Serve immediately.

BUYING YOUR BLOSSOMS

Here's where to find the farmers at city greenmarkets. For times, directions and more on the program, visit www.cenyc.org or call (212) 341-2254.

- Hector Tejada: Tejada's Conuco Farm sells fresh produce and baked goods Thursdays at 175th St., Saturdays at Fort Greene Park, Brooklyn.

- Nestor Tello: Fresh eggs at Union Square Mondays and Fridays; Saturdays at Fort Greene Park and Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn; Sundays in Jackson Heights, Queens.

- Martin Rodriguez: Wednesdays in Windsor Terrace, Thursdays in Williamsburg and Borough Park, Saturdays in Sunset Park (all in Brooklyn); Sundays in Jackson Heights, Queens.

- Manuel Portilla: Fresh produce grown on the program's training farm in Staten Island, Saturdays in St. George, Staten Island.

- Sonia Lopez: Fresh produce Sundays in Jackson Heights, Queens.

Graphic

KEITH FERRIS PROJECT TAKES ROOT: Martin Rodriguez with Mexican radishes, which he sells in city; nieces Cynthia and Rosario, below, join farm team.

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