
CORN FED: (A PERSONAL JOURNEY) FROM APPALACHIA TO THE HEARTLAND

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In the dog days of a Midwest summer, it's corn season. You'll find it in abundance in what has become a fixture in just about every community along my home town, Chicago's North Shore: the farmer's market. Catering to a fervent locavore movement, these weekly gatherings also tap into the nostalgia of our country's agrarian past.

Aside from the jumpstarted tomato plant I cart home every spring from Costco, I don't fancy myself much of a farmer. As a kid though, I spent summers at my grandparents' house in the foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. Every year my grandfather, a shift worker at the local Dupont factory, planted a garden of fruits, vegetables and legumes that stretched like a carpet over more than an acre in the field above the family house. I always missed the spring planting season, but arrived each June from my Nordic Minnesota home, eager to help in the fields.

Throughout the summer, as things came into season, we feasted on a rolling harvest that included watermelon, potatoes, corn, beets, greens, carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash and green beans. I particularly recall the corn. It came into season late July. While my grandmother was head chef and bottle washer, she steadfastly shunned laboring in the hot sun, preferring to leave fieldwork to my Papa (and to me, as I loved this task). Each morning during corn season I'd scamper up the hill behind my grandfather, my two strides to his one, grabbing hold of the coveralls on his tall, lanky frame. He ran interfer-

ence for me through the 7-foot high forest of stalks, his boots clearing a passage for me beneath the canopy. He taught me how to read the color of the silk tassels as a gauge of the cob's ripeness and how, with a wristy two-step twist-pull motion, the cob would separate from the stalk. With a thud, it was then delivered to the bushel basket Papa carried. After a pass through each parallel row, we'd head back down the hill, laden with our bounty and covered in silks. I felt triumphant.

A morning of picking meant an afternoon spent at my grandfather's side, shucking and silking the shiny cobs outside on the carport. We'd hand off the cleaned cobs to my grandmother in the kitchen. During season, we'd eat corn every day and with each day I would wonder, 'Would it be boiled on the cob or creamed?' Southern creamed corn is a succulent, gooey porridge requiring the kernels be amputated in two passes along the cob's shaft with a sharp knife. Any residual kernel material is then scraped from the cob. This extraction process, almost violent in nature, would leave a crime scene of sticky corn splatter on my Granny's spectacles and all surrounding surfaces. The kernels and their juice would simmer in a little salt, pork fat flour and butter as the shadows grew long outside. We'd gather, finally, at the supper table, hungry from a full day's work. Like drinking from a fire hose, I would gorge on as much corn as my stomach would hold each day. There was something wildly satisfying about eating something plucked from the backyard that morning.

To flatten out the cycle of summer feast and winter famine, all serious gardeners learn to preserve their fresh fruits and vegetables. Almost as soon as the harvest was over, Granny's canning and freezing began. By the end of autumn, the basement freezer chest was brimming with rectangular Tupperware

dishes, neatly stacked and sorted. My grandmother's trademark deliberate, cursive script identified each precious container "Corn," "Squash," "October Beans," "Turnip greens," and so on. Against the cool basement cinderblock nearby, on shelving my grandfather built, stood rows of Ball canning jars filled with green beans, beet pickle, blanched tomatoes, and pickled peaches. Irregularly shaped and perfectly imperfect potatoes and sweet potatoes filled cardboard boxes on the basement floor. I hated to leave my grandparents at the end of each summer, but I knew by Christmas, along with my parents this time, I'd be back. And on the dinner table would be, amidst Virginia ham, fresh biscuits, and all the other preserved treasures from the basement, a bowl of piping hot creamed corn.

My Papa is no longer with us but my grandmother, now 87, still lives in the house. Her days of canning and freezing are over though and the basement cupboard is bare. She laments that none of the "young folks" in her rural community even plant gardens anymore. Her corn and greens and peaches now come from the Walmart Superstore a few miles away. She misses Papa's garden, as do I. Last week at my local market, I scanned a table stacked high with recently picked corn. For a moment, my eyes closed at a distant memory. I fished my phone from my purse and dialed. "Hey Granny," I asked, "can you talk me through how to make your creamed corn recipe?" She chuckled and said, yes, of course she could. A few moments later, the leathery-skinned farmer from Michigan raised an eyebrow as I approached, laden with 24 ears of his corn, their sharp tips straining the plastic bags with which I struggled. "You having a big Labor Day cookout or something?" he asked good-naturedly, as he handed me my change. "No," I called back, heading to my car, "This is for Christmas dinner."