



BRANCHING OUT

I have come to find myself through the source of food.

Ben Bebenroth

It's funny how the earth works in circles. Everything in natural systems returns once again to the source. The closer we hold ourselves in proximity to nature, the easier it is to see and feel this connection. The further we keep our feet from soil, the less likely it is for us to feel this connection. The more disconnect we have from the earth and the systems of life, we can assume that there may be an equal disconnect in our lives. Reconnection with the earth, primal wild spaces, and expansive views of infinite layers of terminating patterns becomes the soothing embrace that is waiting and willing to hold us until we accept this patient mothering. The womb of all known life sits calmly, a source of energy and mystery that has propelled our sense of awe, peace, and wonder for all of time. There she sits all along our commute, our commiserations, and consumptions; waiting for us to pause long enough for an ancient whisper to be not only heard but understood.

Some people are carried close to the breast of the wild; others, separated at birth, come to know comfort a great distance from feral experiences. There is no better or worse condition, as we are meaning-making machines and make our normal where we find ourselves. We accumulate meaning behind our environments, and once this bond has been fused, there is little the societal systems of consumption, extraction, and distraction can do to separate the mind, body, and spirit from this interpreted truth.

Enter the self.

Enter this equation of human operational protocols into the quiet space of self-discovery and allow that to unfold in a natural background. Perhaps some of the glory of the digital age is this very paradox: “I have become so distracted by digital assaults on my consciousness that now moments in nature feel that much more powerful. A returning to the roots of my existence...”—perhaps.

A similar learning and set of safety-based rules are constructed in the mind of a person around food. And an equally large assault on “natural foods and flavors” has been waged as well and as aggressively on our attention span. A large part of that war on your attention span is directed at your attention toward food. Foods that soothe, foods that spell F-U-N, foods that hurt, foods that heal, and foods that are as unappealing as a hospital visit. As it happens, getting people to agree about food has actually been a very large component of my career.

- 🍷 *What fish should we run this weekend as a special?*
- 🍷 *What sauce goes best with this Purple Passion asparagus?*
- 🍷 *What should we plant next to the Tuscano kale to help prevent or bait the cabbage moths away from the primary harvest?*
- 🍷 *Who is coming out to the farm this Monday for the hog harvesting, and what should we plan for the sub-primals in advance of taking this animal's life?*

Ben Bebenroth is chef/founder of Spice Hospitality Group, which includes Spice Acres, a farm in Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

These questions became commonplace for me to be asking of my chefs, sous chefs, cooks, and farm managers. As our commitment to the land of Spice Acres blossomed in Cuyahoga Valley National Park, we also became the stewards of young minds and gut biomes through the formation of an educational non-profit, Spice Field Kitchen. Now being flanked by first-graders regularly professing their aversions to the very products that I was dedicating my life toward rearing and respecting, I found myself with a new set of questions seeking consensus.

- 🍷 Who here loves tomatoes?
- 🍷 What are some of your favorite foods, class? Just shout it out!
- 🍷 Where do healthy foods come from? Healthy soil, right?
- 🍷 How do we make healthy choices with food?
- 🍷 What does healthy soil need in order to grow healthy food?

These questions seemed basic. The answers that we would generally receive were anything but. As my great friend and founding partner of Spice Field Kitchen, Steven Baker, would later say, “We are turning vegetable aversions into vegetable advocacy. These kids are shopping with their parents, and after years of time in the garden and in the kitchen classroom and field trips to the farm, they are asking their parents for broccoli and zucchini!”

This is a stark contrast to the requests these same students may have been making in the years prior to having ... get ready for this one:

“Time outside of the classroom in nature with caring people asking thoughtful questions.”

Curiosity breeds curiosity, and demands breed demands.

The change in these young minds and guts did not happen because *we* made it happen. It didn’t happen because the teacher said so. This change happened with consistent exposure and the openness to trying things that at first seemed scary and then just seemed different and eventually felt normal. Eating vegetables and eating seasonally is normal. Eating fast food and gas station pizza is not normal, but

we have been convinced of it by the ubiquitousness and seemingly unavoidable convenience of it all. We have been trained to allow our cravings to rule us and to need to be soothed by digital distractions and sugar—now.

As my actionable and operational roles in all of these ventures have changed in some regards and I have been left to tend this land of Spice Acres myself, I am also experiencing a tectonic shift of my own awareness and normal. My agricultural pursuits have been informed not only by a changing business landscape shaped by a global pandemic and economic alterations, but also by a slowing of expectations. Releasing the land from an annual \$150,000 obligation of produce and protein has opened me up to what was already happening for a few thousand years prior to my ambitious visions. Thinking first fast, and then slow, pushed a “busy-ness” aside for another point of view altogether.

“What would happen here without me?”

The answer: more than you could imagine, and less than you might appreciate in our short lifetimes.

I am an ambitious person that was driven from a point of energetic inflection in my life. Many inflections, actually, but this one some 30 years ago has most certainly made an impact on me to lead a life lived out with purpose.

It’s 1996 and I am standing barefoot on the still weeping stump of a beech tree too large in circumference to hug with two humans. I am scarred to a depth of my core being. All that was ever sacred and good has been clear-cut to make way for airconditioned nightmares, man caves, and three-car garages. The drumbeat of “progress through real estate development” has drowned out the whisper of the crickets and the toads. I am 17 years old. I have just returned home after graduating from Fork Union Military Academy. I am seeing nothing that resembles what I left upon my departure for Virginia in August of the prior year; a pristine forest that had hosted my youth. I am crying the tears of a fallen tree; a raging inferno of anger has replaced my hope for humanity. A silencing of the laughter of a precious and purely feral youth. My kingdom has fallen.

The friendships and forts I had constructed in these trees have collapsed into the recess of my memories.

This grand stump, this epic wound, the only remaining evidence not bucked up and hauled off to furniture and paper mills to grace office buildings and homes that somehow all seem synthetic and hollow in all regards of honorable purpose under this bright star.

This moment was just another moment in a very challenging teenage and early twenties period of my life, marking the miles of a boy becoming a man and living through the death of everything precious to the child. For the man to be born, the boy must die, and dying I am, in this moment. I am dying with this majestic beech tree. I am losing any level of desire to follow a life of practicality and progress if this is how we are defining it. The underpinnings of my ethical and moral disposition have already been laid firmly by the writings of Edward Abbey, Henry David Thoreau, Wendell Berry, Walt Whitman, John Muir, and the societal perversions of Hunter S. Thompson, Carl Hiaasen, Noam Chomsky, and Howard Zinn. I am a counterculturist at my core and in this moment absorbing the energy of the earth through the mortal wound of God's perfection in design of living systems. Perhaps these last frequencies of ancient wisdom as sap and skin exchange on the soles of my bare feet. Perhaps the life force of this ultra-connected moment can find fertile ground in what is left of my heart and soul.

From this point I would move on, in a tirade of rebellious and combative energy that would eventually find me in the United States Marine Corps and soon thereafter in a jail cell staring far out to the only tree in sight through the barred window of the Camp Pendleton brig. Holding fast to the outcropping of rocks on a distant ridgeline, this singularly visible small tree became my teacher of stillness through internal struggle and storms. As I meditated in my rack waiting out my time, a temporary bridge between the soulless container I was physically bound within and the connection of my true self was built. I would metaphysically leave this concrete bunker of regret and sit under this small tree, alone, calm, connected. Connecting once again to nature and to the purpose and the act of nurturing life rather than the destruction of it.

This tree was my refuge.

Trees and the complex agreement between them and

the plant, animal, bird, insect, amphibian, bacterial, and fungal kingdoms hold more life and knowledge than we can ever hope to attain. The continued exposure to the seasonal and systematic fluctuations of these life systems has become my greatest teacher.

I am remembering the early days of my culinary pursuits. Memorizing all the spices and herbs, questing to master techniques of attention-worthy display. Coming through the application of these ingredients, I was



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led back to the origin of these foundations of culinary creations of my past. I came to understand compost more than the carrot that lured me into this endless collaboration of life. The more time I spent on farms in pursuit of the best ingredients, the more my quest for culinary inspiration was turning into a pursuit of simplicity of life and the closeness of my garden to my kitchen and to my family. In this saga, trees and perennials were the main characters of this lesson, and connecting the size of an emerging oak leaf to the size of a squirrel's ear to the timing of a morel patch became a language that was already alive in my soul just waiting for my mind and body to slow down a bit to hear it.

As we move forward into the fog of industrialized progress and the technological conjuring of AI, we will be required to remain even more connected to this already infinite source of intelligence and respectful systematic wisdom. It will be the tree talkers that take us back to sanity as we crave this primal connection to the land from which we are born and ultimately return to. This earth is not here for us to be using, but rather for us to be connecting with and collaborating on to attain global success for all species together as one world. The mission of this collective consciousness is as infectious as blight or bark beetles. Together we can tip the scales of global consciousness into one of stewardship, contribution, and service of natural systems, and it will require all of us to make a small commitment.

I commit to stay more grounded and open-minded than yesterday. I will build strength through compassion and display power through understanding. I will make choices for the greater good by putting the earth first.

I will do this, as the trees do not seem bothered by any of the happenings of late. If they can just keep collaborating through punishing droughts, massive onslaughts of rain, and trunksnapping microbursts, I can at the very least plant my feet on the bare earth, walk slowly, and appreciate the web of roots underneath us quite literally “holding it all together.”

In the words of Thich Nhat Hanh: “When I see the tree, I see the cathedral. I see all of God and the heavens in the tree. Without the tree, there is no air. I breathe in the air and I am thankful for the tree. Without the tree, there is no air. Without the air, there is no life. So the tree is God.”

In the past 13 years on Spice Acres, I have helped to create a great deal of culinary memories, educational moments, and a monumental amount of physical work. Most of that work of the past five years has been done solo. In relative silence. This work has not always been timely, pleasurable, or planned. But in reflection, that work was a required punch card for my understanding of the systems of natural life all that much more. The chicken chores at 1 a.m. in the driving rain fell low on the list of endearing moments while staring at the task. In reflection, however, that work changed my consciousness of those animals as beings, waiting in a cold dark space wondering if fresh water was going to arrive. And when it did, they felt the relief and the rush of the quenching of midnight thirst after an overly ambitious chef also signed up to be this guy too. Those moments brought life into balance for me. A returning from capitalist pursuits in the city all day and night to a servitude of natural systems in the dark, alone, only truly appreciated by the ancient eyes of 300 birds in the freezing cold. The mist of my breath curling up in front of my headlamp as I lugged two five-gallon buckets of water across the field to the henhouse. These acts were not just in service of chickens, but



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the place that chickens held in the nutrient web of input and extraction on land. As the journey unfolded, we pushed that aggressive culinary and agricultural program for seven years to every end possible. Cut flowers, sows farrowing, 300 laying hens, five acres of vegetable and fruit production, and a 70member CSA (community-supported agriculture) operation. Fully committed, and by the end of this we just may have to be committed.

The entrance of Covid into this timeline of stewardship was not only a breathing moment in a fight for culinary survival but a sacred gap of activity that I believe the earth was waiting for. The return to nature during Covid was alarming. As a resident of Cuyahoga Valley National Park, I can honestly say ... this place was mobbed. And it was beautiful to see. As the guests flocked onto the trails, rivers, and woods, I became responsible for navigating a special event venue and fruit and vegetable operation through the business fallout of a lifetime. But this moment again proved to be exactly the needed challenge at exactly the right time.

This time, this literal moment in time watching the farm “spring to life,” was the first time I had really “seen spring” as opposed to compete with it.

The rhythm, the preinsecthatch bluebird days, the time of overwintered spinach not needing to be harvested, washed, weighed, and bagged for the restaurant ... just waiting for the right time to pick some for dinner. The absence of school buses and cooking demonstrations, cocktail parties and weddings meant that there was no venue set up dangling in the back of my mind to get to at the end of an already full day. As more season came into focus, the time we took with the picking and preserving was only for home, a new concept for me after two decades in the kitchen. The naturally abundant harvest of shiitake that came on from our 1,600 logs filled the roadside stand, and the picking became almost meditative without the hustle of a thousand begging tasks in my pocket. The slowing of time during this period allowed for the opening of the aperture of my mind to a frequency aligned with a hawk’s call and the song of the coyote. The shiitake were not only being harvested but also observed. With

space enough in the day to stop an hour into harvest and sit with a log, covered in large open caps the size of quartcontainer lids. Unfurled, with a smokelike drift of spores gliding on the current propelled at a gentle speed only by the rising of recently warmed air in the sunlight filtering through the pines.

This break was regenerative as a human, and it was also a beckoning call from this land that I have been entrusted with in order to shift into a mindset of collaboration and service. I began protecting bur oaks, w oaks, cherry, elm, willows, cottonwoods and sycamore. I started seeing the fields as collection panels of calorie capture for not only hungry dinner guests but for all for the supporting web of wildlife that depend on this place. Perhaps this level of stewardship was unwelcome to past CSA customers or eager foodies, but this land needed a rest, as did my mind. We rested together. As the silence grew, the voice of calm, of necessity, of simplicity, was gaining not only volume, but tone. A tone that no longer harmonized with a crop rotation or planting schedule. *A tone that required nothing. Nothing but active listening.* I have prioritized “slowtimefirst” and feel strongly that it has changed what choices I allow to be backed up with intention and action. I have been deeply encouraging my family, my friends, and my team at work to start the day with quiet time for the self and the planet and to make moves from there.

Everything and everyone is participating in circular natural systems.

“There are no unsacred spaces in the world. Only sacred spaces and desecrated spaces.” — Wendell Berry

The work I continue to do is answering to the same cause.

“To change how people connect with the earth; and ultimately themselves.”

I have contributed to this by “changing how people connect with food,” as my culinary degree and focus seemed predisposed to making an impact there.

Heading into the next chapter of societal experience, our sacred spaces will need a balance of thinking to ensure their and our survival, as we are not separate from anything in nature, and merely a participant.

There is evidence to show that in past imperial collapses it was not necessarily the ecosystem or the political system that drove these societies to ruin as much as it was the mindset of the people. There is evidence to show that the “Athenian Mindset”—one representing openness to learning, commerce, and culture—led to a resilience and gentleness of societal progress and intelligence. The opposite of that mindset has been titled “The Spartan Mindset”—a posture of defensiveness and protecting what has already been accumulated at the expense of tolerance, understanding, and integration. As we look out onto the natural world, the overwhelming evidence points to “integration of all forms” to be the systematic key to survival. My good friend and fellow Cuyahoga Valley National Park farmer Mark Trapp is teaching me now that companion plantings of eight or more plant families create a community of collaborative root systems that can outlast droughts and share nutrients. We are working to establish these multifamily systems and cohabitating networks to then plant fruits, nuts, hardwoods, and native pillars of life into. To ensure longevity, on the timeline of an oak.

Why would communities of human beings be any different?

This turn of the tides of “human doings” that is willing to drill anywhere and log the Amazon at whim seems to have forgotten that these are lifegiving and lifeliving systems. To maintain these pillars of a kind, naturerespecting society may just require a blend of both Athenian openmindedness and a Spartan stance of protection that shows what truly means most to the people. All people, rather than just the profitminded politicians and plunderers and greedy captains of industry who set out to conquer not only this fractionally understood world but also the next.

We are here now. The only place we can ever be.

- 🌱 What are we doing with this realization?
- 🌱 Have we taken full stock of what is at hand and what there is to lose?
- 🌱 Have we taken a side in the experience of plundering, or have we firmly planted our bare feet on soil with a full commitment to protecting it?
- 🌱 Are you providing for that which provides for you?

Would your greatgrandchildren be satisfied with the answers to their questions of:

- 🍷 “What did you do when _____ was being logged, mined, dammed, or datacentered?”
- 🍷 What did you do yesterday?
- 🍷 What will you do tomorrow?
- 🍷 How will they know you cared?

The precious act of care for these systems is perhaps one of the most delicate acts of care for our own selves at the very same time—opening this opportunity for our pace of life, our consciousness of other living systems, and the delicacy of the balance that our planet

is held in. This is a remarkably rewarding way to stay firmly rooted in doing good for what matters most over the long haul.

Balance.

Balance must be regained, reestablished.

To do so, I will offer a small but massive shift in thought that may find fertile ground in the hearts and minds that it is meant to.

“We must return to offering more than we take.

Contribution must outpace extraction.

This is the way of the wild.”

Sincerely,
Ben Bebenroth

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