

# Honor the Work



# Respect the Workers

## Local farmers follow food from start to finish

By Vernon Chow

It is difficult to describe a day in the life of a farmer. In my three years of work on a vegetable farm in Juniata County, I've learned that there is no typical day. Seasons and weather affect a great deal of what we do. Sometimes we work late into the night, sitting on the seats of the water-wheel transplanter and putting seeds into the ground before the rain makes the fields too wet to drive a tractor on. Other times, forecasts for drier weather mean that we have no immediate pressures—so we knock off work at 5:30 and cool off by jumping into the creek that makes a bow around our fields.

Because ours is a diverse vegetable operation, our work also varies with the season. At any time there is usually one task that seems to occupy us day after day, but what that task is varies month by month. In the

ly, a farmer can't have too romantic a view of nature: pigweed has a rugged beauty and can produce an amazing number of seeds, but that's all the more reason to put the metal sweeps on the tractor and pull the young plants loose from the soil so they dry up and die. Every so often, though, I do catch a glimpse of the work going on in parallel with mine, like when I look up from plopping tomatoes into my basket to see the large black and yellow spider whose distinctively patterned web I have only ever found in the tomato patch.

There is also a great satisfaction in seeing the integrated cycle of life. We planted our tomatoes in plastic trays in March, transplanted them into holes in black plastic in May to keep weeds away, staked them and irrigated them, and now it's picking time. With the plum tomatoes, we sort them from the green carriers into boxes based on qual-



Photo by Angela Brubaker

Vernon Chow, of Village Acres Farms, describes the day in the life of a farmer. In addition to its other farm operations, Village Acres is a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm that makes weekly summer deliveries to members in State College.

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early spring we may prune blueberries for days on end.

For about five weeks starting at the end of April, asparagus has to be picked every day, sometimes twice a day. For a few intense weeks, picking strawberries dominates our activity and the work of our hired help. In July we have a wide variety of things to do, but every time we finish a task, hanging over our heads is the job of tying up tomato plants so they stand upright and the fruit is easier to pick.

Now, in August, it is picking the tomatoes that is the constant: cherries put in small buckets so the weight doesn't crush the ones on the bottom and make them split, plum tomatoes placed in green plastic totes, and heirloom tomatoes cut with scissors to leave the green stem or calyx and then carefully placed on trays so the calyxes don't poke their neighbors.

Even though farmers constantly deal with nature, most of the time we don't really think about it. And nature works both for and against us: helping our tomatoes grow, but also the weeds; multiplying the ladybugs, but also the aphids. To work efficient-

ity and ripeness. This is the final product: the elliptical red globes found on supermarket shelves.

We are used to seeing food as shiny shapes in the supermarket, but working on a farm has made me realize how ignorant I was about what it was before it became a commodity, its links to the earth, the green plants with leaves, the human labor. That backstory is different for the red globes from an organic farm than for those from a conventional farm, even if eyes and chemical testing find them identical.

For dinner I cut out some of the superficial splits from the leftover tomatoes and fry them for tomato sauce, completing a cycle that most people see only the very end of. I talked to a small-scale vegetable farmer in Iowa who said many of his dairy farmer neighbors are so disconnected from the machine-dominated process of milking the cows and chilling the milk before trucks haul it to the central processing facility that they just buy milk in a plastic jug at the store.

Conventional farming follows the rest of our society in its implicit assumption that as

much labor as possible should be done by machinery...somehow, picking tomatoes in sun and rain is dehumanizing, but sitting in a cubicle staring at a computer screen is not.

It is true that I got five times as much *monetary* compensation when I worked in an office. I never saw the spider webs or jumped in the creek, though.

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