

Cat Bennett and Milkweed Tussock Tubers:

A Vision in Purple Potatoes (Among Other Kinds)

BY CAMILLA AMMIRATI

For someone who can trace her potato farming heritage, in part at least, to a low-key legacy of spud smuggling across the US–Canadian border (such as it was at the time), you can nonetheless say that Catherine Bennett of Milkweed Tussock Tubers potato farm comes by it honestly. But there’s much more to it than that, thinking toward both the past and the future.

Cat is a regenerative agriculturalist, and though it was a deep, proper winter day when we spoke earlier this year, that spirit of both nurtured and nurturing growth was clear and strong, with rafts of house plants bursting green all around us. On a plot in DePeyster, New York, in the St. Lawrence River Valley area of northern New York, Cat grows small-scale, regenerative root crops, mainly potatoes, with a focus on native roots and unusual varieties—categories that sometimes overlap. At any given time, she might be growing up to 23 varieties for both seed and eating, with growing histories rooted near and far.

These include some “standards for eating,” like the Adirondack Blue and the Peter Wilcox. She’s also thinking about getting back into a large white potato for some customers who want that, but she’s always loved the richly colored varieties—purple and blue were the first kinds she grew, getting started at age 12, including a variety called Blackberry that dyes hands purple. She also works with Andean varieties, like Papa Cachos and Purple Peruvians, which are disease- and insect-resistant and have the capacity to weather droughts. And

then, there are the varieties that she is helping to restore—including Cowhorns, a variety associated with Indigenous foodways in the area; the regionally developed Garnet Chili, now rare but foundational to currently common potato varieties; and even a couple of varieties developed next door to her family’s land by local horticultural legend Fred Ashworth.

In one way or another, the potatoes on Cat’s farm connect her to an ever-growing family of regional relations. They all have stories, but a closer look at just one shows the network of plants and people that is supported by and, in turn, further nurtures the long-standing, ongoing practice of growing food in close connection to other farmers and community members. The first potato that Cat grew for her business was an Adirondack Blue given to her by a friend and fellow farmer. Though six generations removed at this point, that strain is the same one that she’s growing out now. “So, that’s kind of neat,” she says. “Farmers sharing.... That’s what it’s supposed to be about, is sharing seed—not having to sell your seed or make a profit. I still have to pay my mortgage, but sharing the seed is very important. The number of people this year alone, I’ve had who say, ‘You have Papa Cachos? I’ve been looking for them for 5 years, or 10 years’—I mean, these people can’t find these varieties anymore, and I’m one of the last ones growing them. I want to be that resource.”

On the day of my visit, I was lucky to find an abundance of these varieties and

others in Cat’s root cellar. Or, as she noted with a hoot, when I asked if she had a root cellar, “Yeah! We *call* it the root cellar. It’s actually what my relatives in Indiana used to do. It’s the master bedroom! You wanna go see it?” I did indeed. She led me upstairs to a room full of potatoes, at first a vision in dusty brown, that her words illuminated into the richness of rainbow flavors and features—and family and cultural knowledge—that they represent. When she moved into her house, it was clear the basement wouldn’t work for storage due to the furnace’s warmth, among other things. Her father had said to her, “Well, you know what they did in Indiana? They would take a spare bedroom and store all of the potatoes under the bed until April.’ By then I have to move them to a colder area. But between now and April, this is the potato room. Papa Cachos, Purple Peruvians. I’m so proud of these guys! They’re three times the size they usually are. Here are the Upstate Abundance, nice, white creamy ones...” She showed me these and a range of other varieties, along with telling me stories about their origins, best ways to eat them, and more. She added, “The floor hasn’t fallen in yet. I had about 2,000 pounds of potatoes here this year. I’ve sold a lot of them ... You can pick up the potatoes, you’re not gonna hurt them.” Later that afternoon, she would kindly send me home with a few pounds of my own and a new obsession with trying out as many potato varieties as I possibly can henceforth, not to mention learning more about how



Cat Bennett of Milkweed Tussock Tubers with potatoes in hands, in the barn. *All photos courtesy of Cornell Cooperative Extension and Cat Bennett, except as noted.*

each can fit into our local food ecology and traditions.

From Indiana to Canada to the Andes to DePeyster—while growing from her own and other roots she connects to—Cat’s business is on the newer side. She officially started Milkweed Tussock Tubers when she felt a calling and sat down to draw her logo in December 2016, the winter after she graduated from St. Lawrence University, and started farming that next spring. However, aside from the time at college, she’d lived on a farm most of her life, growing up amid her parents’ (now her neighbors’) diversified operation, Bittersweet Farm, and she comes from family with strong farming, gardening, and related production traditions, going back generations on both sides.

Cat’s paternal grandmother grew up on a farm in Indiana, and though she eagerly left it for the East Coast when she was 16,

she “swore up and down that one of her children would become a farmer just to spite her.” Sure enough, Cat’s father spent a couple summers on the family farm and came back from one of those visits, at age 11, with a list of livestock and a very specific kind of tractor he intended to have on his farm when he grew up. As Cat describes it, her father has built his “whole life ... around learning about and growing food.” Cat’s mother, meanwhile, also carried on family gardening traditions in her own ways, learning lots about cooking, growing the herbs she was using, getting more into value-added garden products, and gathering often with others for pickle-making, candy-making, and more. Her maternal grandparents all had backyard gardens of some kind around where they lived in Maine.

This maternal history is the family line about whom Cat noted, “If I want to

sound really fancy, I can talk about how my mother’s ancestors used to smuggle potatoes across the St. John’s River between Madawaska, Maine, and various parts of Nova Scotia and Canada and whatnot,” though only because they were sharing food and seed stock before the borders took their current and formal forms. These ancestors, primarily French, were among the many who brought French and French-Canadian traditions into what is now the United States, and while their tater ways have not necessarily been a self-conscious foundation of Cat’s current endeavors, they’ve made it to her table in one way or another—from the hardiness and resiliency of collaborative community foodways to the meat pies that are usually part of Cat’s family’s holiday spreads these days.

As for the more recent offshoots from those roots, with their livestock, gardens, fruit, veggies, herbs, and value-added

products coming from Bittersweet Farm, Cat's parents have been farming collectively for almost 50 years. "So, I've spent my whole life being exposed to that, growing up with that," Cat says. "And because... both farms [her parents' and her own] are organic, regenerative, understanding more of the connection between ecology and food, and social justice and food, things like that." And, indeed, Cat has not only learned a lot from her family's experience in the logistics and ethics of food production but has taken these skills and values further in her own ways, going all in on the effort to support herself, her community, and the land we all depend on, through her approach to growing a climate-resilient—and not incidentally, delicious—crop, which has great potential both to feed people and to give them tools for feeding themselves, in that the same potatoes can be used as ingredients in a dish or as seed for growing future potato crops.

In the process, and continuing to work together often with her parents and their farm, Cat has taken many of the practices, which she grew up with, a step or two further. For instance, she is farming entirely no-till, doing more extensive and purposeful animal crop rotation, upping her fruit production to include more native fruits and berries, pushing the limits of how much canning and preserving can be managed in a season, and developing more of a permaculture area, supporting native species by considering not only pollinator habitats, in general, but also the microhabitat needed to sustain, for instance, a particular native bee. Her focus on native crops, in many ways, arises from her concern about local food sovereignty, farming in a way that bolsters rather than depletes future food production possibilities, and the desire to help create hardy, resilient local food resources—and to create more fellow food producers—as an alternative to the

unsustainable practice of relying too heavily on grocery stores and global supply chains. Farming in this way also helps the community return to a critical level of local knowledge and skill, which were much more of a part of the region's food and food-growing traditions until relatively recently.

As Cat says:

How can I use agriculture to be what it should be, which is, connecting humans and the environment? How can you grow in a manner that's so ecologically responsible that it actually enhances where you're living rather than degrading it? ... Those are my visions. Securing the seed, seed sovereignty, seed viability, seed health. Strengthening the soil, working with the environment, sequestering carbon, building habitat. And then connecting to the community, learning about those cultural traditions, and how I ... can make my farm a place that's open to learning about those



Cat with pigs.



Cat digging potatoes.

things, and connecting those things, and be both a resource and a place of learning, where we begin to know more.

Of course, one of the ways to do all this is to grow crops that already have long connected humans to their environment in mutually beneficial ways, including local varieties proven to be hardy and sustainable within this locality's particular growing conditions over time. While Cat continues to learn more about the Indigenous foodways that deeply underlie and continue to lead the way in sustainable thinking about regional practices, she is also connecting directly to other examples of foods uniquely suited to the current place and time, including an example rooted specifically in the ground right next door to her parents' farm.

That is, another way that Cat picks up on regional food-growing traditions is by growing out potato varieties developed by

local horticulturist Fred Ashworth. Fred was a farmer who became devoted to finding, developing, and propagating fruit and nut trees, among other edible plants, particularly suited to the northern climate. In the 1920s, he started St. Lawrence Nurseries (Potsdam, New York), where he developed and cultivated the trees. For many years after they met in the early 1970s, he continued to do so in partnership with apprentice and dear friend Bill MacKentley who, along with his wife Diana, took over the business, developed it further, and kept it going strong for decades. Bill and Diana passed it on to Bill's apprentice, Connor Hardiman, just a few years ago. Overall, Fred and his scions' approach to these hardy edibles is based on loving attention to the existing varieties in the area, an encyclopedic knowledge of individual trees and other plants around the regional landscape, and a careful integration of local and complementary stock, which they brought

together to preserve and share with growers all around and beyond the North Country. Their work has been instrumental over the past century in both sustaining and adapting local growing traditions, as well as supporting food traditions connected to the delicious varieties they propagate.

Although many value St. Lawrence Nurseries' fruit and nut varieties highly, Fred's potato-growing endeavors are lesser known. A few years ago, thanks to a serendipitous conversation with Bill's daughter Bali at the Potsdam Public Library about her parents' contributions to the seed library there, Cat learned of the similarly significant potatoes—again, a blend of locally particular and carefully integrated complementary stock (in this case, South American). After Bill MacKentley shared some seed potatoes with her, Cat dove into the project of restoring two of these special varieties, the Ashworths and the CDF-9s, beginning with the long project of



Potatoes on scale, Milkweed Tussock Tubers.

cleaning them of viruses to return them to availability for growing and eating. And, in the process, she has become part of the legacy of caring for and carrying forward some uniquely North Country-based foods and flavors.

As for how those flavors get from planting to plating, or how the growing connects to eating, Cat says, “Well for me, I just go out and dig them and then put them in a

frying pan!” She notes that, unlike the case of some larger scale “CAFO” (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) farms where some farmers hesitate to eat their own products, Cat is thrilled to feed both herself and her community with what she grows. In terms of getting potatoes to customers, Cat has experimented with different business models but is working toward selling entirely retail, direct to consumers

at farmer’s markets, at her family’s farm stand, and in more one-to-one connections throughout the community. Committed to making food available to people who need it, she always offers a sliding scale of prices and layaway, and she sometimes barter when that’s best for meeting both the community’s needs and her own around the farm. The scale and approach to growing, selling, and tailored exchange also resonate with long-standing ways of community members working to support themselves and each other. Furthermore, doing so with the bounty of hardy farm and garden crops like potatoes underlies many regional food traditions.

Of course, having potatoes in the mix, specifically, is also part of many North Country family and community food traditions, whether as sides at fish fries and election dinners, staples on the menus at multigenerational family-owned restaurants, or in any number of dishes brought into the area from around the world over past generations and more recently. When asked about whether she sees herself connecting to local and regional food traditions through growing potatoes, Cat quickly points out that there’s no native potato, per se, since potatoes come from South America, and that in considering true traditions of the land and Indigenous foodways, you’d need to look to tubers like the Sunchoke or Solomon’s Seal (both of which she’s also growing). However,

... if you look at what the dominant culture has done for the past few hundred years, potatoes are huge in the North Country. Potatoes are a staple across the country, but particularly in a cold region where you need a vegetable that’s going to keep well, that’s going to provide a lot of calories, that’s going to keep you well-fed, then potatoes are a really good option, and I always think that they’re a really easy crop to grow.

So, for me, what I like to think about is the connection between the growing and the eating. So, Fred developed a potato that grows well in the North Country, which means it came out of North Country soil, which means it’s adapted to the region, which means that

you who have grown up in the North Country soil are going to be able to digest it more. There's going to be a stronger spiritual connection, and as we build a better food system—or as we rebuild a food system—learning those connections is incredibly important. So, I think about that a lot.

But then, I also think about how ... there used to be hundreds of dairy farms with 10 cows apiece on this road. Factory Farm right down the road was called Factory Farm, because it had cheese factories—small cheese factories, because we had enough people doing small dairy to supply that... So, I want to know how we can educate the public about this history that the North Country has of truly being connected to our food, of everybody knowing a little about farming... truly understanding where food comes from, and how that functions on our plate. Especially in a time of climate crisis, we're not going to be able to access so many of these foods we're used to. People are going to have to come back to what's regionally and locally available ... I think it's so important that we get back to that history. And potatoes are an easy crop to do that with. Everybody likes potatoes. Everybody eats potatoes. They're in all sorts of dishes. It's not hard to get somebody started off if you use that.

Has it been said that the way to a community's heart for rebuilding a sustainable food system is through its stomach? Well, that does seem like a promising approach, and with her potatoes going straight from the ground around her into both heirloom recipes and new family favorites on the table, Cat's got you covered there, too. As for her own tater traditions, Cat says, "We've always been a family that eats massive amounts of potatoes, so that's a start." She's pretty sure she's had "potatoes fried or boiled or mashed for breakfast almost every single day."

And as for specific recipes, from her father's side comes a shepherd's pie with potatoes, meat, peas, and corn, as well as exceptionally smooth and creamy "whipped" rather than mashed potatoes, made with a hand blender. On the sweet side, her mom makes "Needhams," a potato-based Christmas candy developed in Needham, Massachusetts, that likely came into the family through her mom's years of making candies with a neighbor in Maine, before Cat's family moved to the North Country when Cat was about 4-1/2 years old. Sometimes, Cat grows specific potatoes *for an especially good dish*, matching fingerlings to a newer recipe

she found for browning the halved, long, thin potatoes flat side down in a skillet with chicken stock until they soften and develop a crisp, buttery bottom. And after some experimentation, following Cat's commitment to eating only homegrown potatoes, the family has also perfected their home-made potato chips and are now thinking about how to improve them even further by cooking them in animal fats from the pigs they raise—deepening the rotation all around from integrated farm field to kitchen table.

And, perhaps, the one that takes the cake, as it were, is the pie—the meat pie mentioned earlier. Cat shares:

We have one recipe that we make every Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's a meat stuffing. It can be used as stuffing for your turkey, and my mother makes a meat pie out of it. So, this is an old French recipe ... an old family recipe. It's really cool because not only does it include all of the potatoes that I've grown, but almost every ingredient in it is something that we've grown. So, it's beef from our cows, it's potatoes from my farm, celery from our farm, onions from the farm, things like that. And so, that's always nice, knowing that I'm able to provide that and not just maintain a tradition but maintain a connection to a tradition in a deeper sense.

Through her efforts with Milkweed Tussock Tubers, Cat, in fact, is helping maintain a range of traditions—from seed to field to fork—whether putting food on people's tables or helping them get their own gardens growing. The remaining question in her own mind, and one she's actively posed to her customers lately, is: Is there enough support for her farm and the work she's trying to do there? For all her passion, dedication, and skill, the challenges are significant, and Cat wonders if, in this region and regarding small-scale gardening all around, there is enough financial support, customer base, and community interest in growing, supporting, and cooking local food to make it possible for a business and an approach like hers to thrive. She believes there is, but as she says:



Milkweed Tussock Tubers' potatoes stored in Cat's "root cellar" master bedroom. Photo by Camilla Ammirati.

I want to prove that. I want Milkweed Tussock Tubers to become a place where people come and learn about local foods, food traditions ... food sovereignty or the social interactions of food. There's so much that a farm can be that is not just putting your hands in the soil. I want to push for that... I want places like this to be welcome to all genders, all colors, all ideas, and abilities, and create that community. Because the community can support the farm, and then the farm can support the community.

After a delightful and thought-provoking afternoon hearing from Cat, not to mention a helping or two of potatoes roasted to crisp and purple perfection shortly thereafter, all I can say is, count me in. ▼

[*Editor's Note:* Camilla Ammirati will be writing *Foodways* columns for *Voices* in coming issues. Meet our new columnist on the next page.]

Mrs. McAllan's Meat Pie

From Cat Bennett: "This recipe comes from my mother's father's mother, my Great-Grandmother McAllan."

- 3 pounds potatoes (a soft, dry variety like Green Mountains, or perhaps, Purple Peruvians)
 - 3 pounds meat, cut into cubes (stew meat, perhaps, or a chuck roast. Lamb, beef, or pork will all work)
 - 1 large onion
 - 4 stalks worth of celery (standard celery or many stalks of cutting celery)
- Poultry Seasoning:
- 1 part sage
 - $\frac{3}{4}$ -part thyme
 - $\frac{1}{2}$ -part parsley
 - 1 part marjoram

(We mix our seasoning in bulk. Each ingredient is measured in cups—one cup sage, $\frac{3}{4}$ cup thyme, etc. —but you may not have that much of each herb, so this is the ratio. In this recipe, we add 2 Tbsp.)

Potatoes should be chunked and boiled. We peel ours, but that is not necessary. Meat should be browned in a skillet with a little water and butter. Now, we use a meat grinder (ours is an attachment to the mixer) to blend all ingredients. Add the ingredients in a bit of a pattern—some meat, some spuds, herbs, a bit of gravy, and onions and celery, and then repeat. Don't get stressed about it. There will be juice with the meat; use that to keep the mixture moist.

Squish the filling into a pie crust, cover with a top crust. Bake at 375°F for 45 minutes, or until the crust is golden brown.



Cat's hands with potatoes.

Meet Camilla Ammirati

Some of my earliest memories involve growing, cooking, and sharing food—standing in the sandy New Jersey pine barrens soil of my grandfather's garden as he snapped off a snap pea for me to try, sitting on the step stool seat in the kitchen while my grandma stirred the gravy, or falling asleep rocked by the gentle waves of laughter from the other end of the house where the grown-ups still lingered at the table after a long dinner.

My own family traditions continued to come to me through food, among other things, as I was growing up—and/or continued to flow right past me as I was shoving a measuring cup into the stream of “about as much flour as you think you need” while a beloved elder poured it straight out of the bag). The importance of those home experiences shaped my curiosity in many ways, from my childhood through to my focusing my graduate work in American literature and cultural history on the question of how domestic space, including food-related activities within it, reflects and shapes national belonging.

After moving here to Canton, New York, in 2012, I had the great fortune of diving into the field of folklore through my work over several years as the Director of Research and Programs at TAUNY (Traditional Arts in Upstate New York). Throughout that time, foodways were an important and always resurfacing element of the work, whether through the stories of food and food-growing that people

passed along, the dishes they shared while we talked about other aspects of their experiences, or the recipes they cooked up in the kitchen at The TAUNY Center in Canton, New York. It was a thrill and a delight that in my last year working with TAUNY, I was able to focus on developing TAUNY's traditional foodways research and programming through the “Folk to Table” initiative.

Most recently, I've been excited to return to the classroom, bringing the focus on foodways into courses that I teach in St. Lawrence University's First-Year Program, and with an upcoming dive into the local food system as Faculty Co-Director of St. Lawrence's Sustainability Program, beginning in fall 2022. Though I'm no longer on staff at TAUNY, folklore has reshaped my interest in cultural life, in and beyond New York's North Country, in an ongoing way. And while the rich fabric of regional traditions includes so many gleaming threads that it's hard to choose one area of focus over another, it's wonderful—I'd even say delectable—to explore it all through an inquiry into how foodways preserve, reflect, support, and sustain individual and collective traditions of so many kinds. From seed-saving to gravy-stirring to table-setting, the ways people grow, procure, eat, prepare, and share food all say important things about themselves, their communities, and the regions they make up. And as we grapple—again, both individually and collectively—with the many challenges of the moment, it's truly nourishing to



see the ways food and food-growing traditions can point us toward the most hopeful possibilities for sustaining ourselves, body and soul, into the future. I'm honored, as always, to get to observe, document, and help share traditions and perspectives of many throughout the region, through *Voices* and in other work. I hope you enjoy these glimpses of food life and culture I have shared here and in future issues, and I always want to hear about more. You can reach me at camilla.ammirati@gmail.com. Share a dish, share your story, point me toward foodways we should all know about and celebrate! And meanwhile, get yourself a snack or something—as my grandmas would say, “Did you eat?” *Mangia!*

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