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# Ajuar to Za'atar and Pickled Everything in Between: Visiting Sasha Kocho Williams' Annual Plant Sale and Small Change Farm

BY CAMILLA AMMIRATI

*"You're my first customer!"*

I was delighted to be greeted with this exclamation when, after rolling up to Sasha Kocho Williams' annual plant sale, I got enticed into picking up some gorgeous homemade bread, muffins, and cranberry lemonade before I even made it to the array of plant starts. Two of Sasha's four children were running the tent, selling a beautiful array of baked goods in paper packets, eggs, flowers, homemade salves, and more. A nearby homemade sign noted there would also be music later in the day. A short walk past it, down the path would take you into Small Change Farm proper, Sasha and her husband Ali's homestead farm in Potsdam, New York,

with its extensive vegetable and herb patches, high tunnel, greenhouse spaces, and barns lively with goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, and pigs. Enticing as a peek down the path was, however, I was determined to get to the actual plant sale part of the plant sale visit, and would have to wait till a later visit for more of a tour.

With treats stowed and hands free for plants again, I went to check out the other offerings. The plant sale is officially a one-day event, although in reality, it sprawls like a leggy tomato, with folks asking to come by in the days before and after. Sasha will keep answering messages and posting until the plants are all gone, or as she did this year,

she might end up donating a few flats to the Neighborhood Center to make the remaining plants available to community members who couldn't otherwise access them. As she says, "I just want people to grow food!"

The sale was set up in the farm stand by the road. Alongside the shed full of vegetable and herb starts was a table of perennial flowers for sale, as well as a box of extra seeds up for the taking. Inside the shed, tables were loaded with flats of tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, and salad greens, as well as a range of culinary and/or medicinal herbs, including both familiar and unusual varieties. A small, happy crew of folks buzzed around the offerings, asking for this or that kind of tomato



Sasha Kocho Williams at her annual plant sale in a brief, quiet moment. Though Sasha doesn't sell plants with guarantees, she is glad to offer advice and support to growers both during and after the sale. *All photos by the author unless otherwise noted.*

or pepper and, if they were anything like me, gearing up to buy several more plants than they'd originally intended to. Some were clearly visitors who came back year after year, including a few who were excited to pick up particular varieties to suit their personal and cultural foodways, which are hard to find elsewhere.

The plant sale is just one of Sasha's many ongoing activities around the farm that contribute to sustaining her family and encouraging others around her who are similarly interested in growing and preserving food. Among other things, for instance, she volunteers and teaches as a Master Food Preserver locally with Cornell Cooperative Extension. Although this particular event is new as traditions go, it both draws on deep roots and has been quickly growing its own roots deeper into the North Country soil, since Sasha and her family started it four years ago. The plant sale grew naturally out of her general sensibilities and efforts at the farm. These have included starting her own plants from seed, her inclinations to use every scrap of the growing process, and her own familial and cultural grounding. Beginning as the logical next step one year when Sasha figured they might as well have a sale to distribute the surplus of seedlings after growing their own

## Fermented Garlic Scapes

As shared by Sasha Kocho Williams:

Using garlic scapes from the farm and peppers that Sasha grows for her family and may have available any given year at the plant sale, here are a couple delicious dishes from Sasha's kitchen. Sasha says, "I don't really use recipes much. So here are some guidelines, infinitely adjustable...":

If you're into local food or gardening, you've probably come across garlic scapes and likely, made a delicious pesto out of them. But then what? And what do you do with 700 of them? After pesto, that is? You ferment them, to make a Russian classic pickle.

### Method:

- Cut the pointy tough ends off, just after the immature flower bud, and coil 3–5 scapes together in a knot.
- Pack these down into a wide-mouth quart or half-gallon Mason jar.
- Mix a brine—one heaping tablespoon of salt to one quart of water—and top up the jar, ensuring the scapes are completely submerged.
- Cover with a loose-fitting lid and put it on a plate.
- Start tasting your ferment after about 3 weeks—although I generally let mine go two months or more. When fermented to your liking, store in a very cool basement or root cellar, or in the fridge.

*"What to do with them? Well, you could use them as a snack while drinking vodka. Or you can chop them up and use them to add zing to almost anything—particularly winter salads and slaws when you need a punchy hit of garlic. They keep their crunch beautifully and will store in the fridge for months."*



The roadside sign for the annual plant sale. I arrived early, and cars were lining the road by the time I left.

starts, the plant sale has become an annual event that she intends to continue indefinitely, as it meets many goals at once—providing supplemental income, offering a meaningful outlet for surplus plants, providing neighbors with a way to grow food, and contributing to community-building around shared interests in healthy and sustainable foodways and related skills in the area.

Along with other aspects of her life and work at the farm, the plant sale is also an expression of her heritage and experience—from her childhood to more recent learning and exploration—around foodways. Born in Brooklyn, New York, of parents who were both immigrants, Sasha describes her cultural heritage as "mixed-up," but essential elements come through clearly in the foods she grows and what she does with them, from continuations of childhood practices to carrying on the drive of her Russian forebears to

## Ajvar (“eye-var”)— Roasted Pepper Paste

“This Balkan classic has as many variations as cooks. You ideally need Ajvarski or similar peppers (Beaver Dam is another good variety, but there are more), that are sweet with a hint of mild to moderate heat. You can add some spicier ones for more heat (poblanos work nicely), or conversely, pad it with sweet bell peppers for less heat. But they must be roasted.”

### Ingredients:

Peppers  
Eggplant  
Tomatoes  
Garlic  
Salt  
Lemon juice  
Olive oil  
Optional herbs

### Amounts:

This will depend on what you have. Make sure that peppers are the predominant flavor—about 4:1:1 (so, for example, 4 pounds of peppers to 1 pound of eggplant and 1 pound of tomatoes... but we make very big batches with much more than this).

### Method:

- Roast all your vegetables. Blister the skins of the peppers, then remove skins and seeds.
- Remove eggplant and tomatoes’ skins (seeds optional). Chop everything well.
- Peel and mince your garlic (measure with your heart, but it needs A LOT—you can add more as it cooks if needed).
- Sauté the garlic in olive oil.
- Add all the roasted vegetables, and salt and lemon juice to taste.
- Simmer on low to let the flavors combine and reduce moisture.
- You can leave it chunky, or use an immersion blender to make a smoother paste.
- Taste it and make sure it has enough garlic.
- Continue to simmer until, when you stir it with a wooden spoon, it’s like a thick porridge, not a soup.
- Then, you can either pressure can it (in pint jars, 30 min, 10 lbs. of pressure), or freeze it (in straight-sided jars approved for home freezing, or in ziplock bags, after it as cooled), or eat it up. It will keep for at least 2 weeks in the fridge.

### Hints:

- I roast vegetables in a very hot outdoor gas or charcoal grill, in batches as they ripen, then peel and freeze them in bags. When the rest of harvest preservation has calmed down, I take everything out to defrost, and then continue the recipe from there.
- It works nicely to freeze in quart bags, and then defrost a bag and transfer the contents to a jar in the fridge when you want to eat it.
- This pairs wonderfully with roasted meat, but also with cheese, in sandwiches, on a mezze platter, as a dip, or dolloped into bean dishes and stews for extra flavor.

always be fermenting and pickling just about anything she can get her hands on.

There is also a clear continuity with her more recent experience living in west Wales, in an area steeped in the culture of the Back-to-the-Land Movement, where families who’d been farming that land for hundreds of years mixed with those who’d been first inspired by self-sufficiency movement leader John Seymour, who founded an influential farm in the neighborhood. Building on training in permaculture and recent efforts to live more sustainably in the urban environment of Bristol, England, Sasha and her family spent a number of years in Wales putting permaculture and homesteading principles into action, running a commercial micro-brewery, raising pigs to close the loop with their consumption of brewery by-products, and generally, connecting with others in the community invested in like-minded goals while growing treasured food varieties for their family—from parsnips to the broad beans beloved in the United Kingdom.

Having moved from Wales to the North Country several years ago, Sasha and her family continue to grow an array of foods that feed into their rooted foodways. These include specific plant varieties—such as the peppers that she uses for *ajika*, a Georgian (from the Caucasus) chili pepper paste, and for *ajvar*, a Balkan roasted pepper paste. She notes, “I am not Georgian, but if you’ve ever lived in the Soviet Union, everyone sort of takes on Georgian food as their own because it’s so good.” She also grows parsnips and leeks, along with raising sheep, that are essential to foods like *cawl*, a traditional Welsh lamb stew, and other foods from her husband’s background, as he is half Welsh and half English. Her work at the farm also expresses a sensibility essential to her food-related heritage, shaped in part by the challenges experienced by past generations. “Another thing that comes from most of my background,” she told me, “is frugality and not wasting food....It’s very hard for me to pull up unwanted *brassica* seedlings from the path. It’s okay because I can feed them to the pigs, but I am the person who’s trying to preserve the stuff [that gets] weeded out.” And preserve



(Above and below) At the plant sale, Sasha offers a range—including many unusual varieties—of vegetables, perennial flowers, and culinary and/or medicinal herbs. She says, “I do grow some ‘normal’ things, but for my own interest, why would I just grow the exact same things that I could buy elsewhere? That seems boring!”

she does, making everything from (a lot of) sauerkraut to pickled garlic scapes, and a preserved version of anything else that crosses (or grows in) her path!

Along with picking up on the driving threads of deeper heritage, her homesteading activities have grown out of closely recollected childhood and family experiences. She grew up with a vegetable garden at her family’s place in the Catskills, a garden that grew in part out of her parents having been “total hippie Back-to-the-Landers.” She describes, for instance, her dad having even built a dodecahedron cabin out of discarded printing press plates to live in the woods in Ithaca, and a striking image of her mom with her long braid alongside a long braid of garlic over her shoulder. Though they’d both since moved into more white-collar work, their Catskills cabin vegetable garden—along with an ethic of valuing self-sustenance and letting as little as possible go to waste—made more of an impact on Sasha and her brother (who also





Two of Sasha's four children were helping out at the plant sale when I arrived. Both are especially excited to take part in the work of the farm, with the older daughter having independently run a flower CSA in previous years.

has a farm) than they might have expected. Sasha describes memories of “weeding beans and all those sorts of things....So I grew up with vegetable gardening, and when I was in a tiny little apartment in Brooklyn, I had basil on the windowsill. I've always grown something, somewhere, always.” She laughs, adding, “And now it's just out of control!”

While there may well be an effusion of plant life all around, Sasha is clearly hard at work keeping a handle on things, and to great effect, supporting not only her own family with the gifts of delicious, healthy, and ethically grown food, but also, through her innate interest in growing unique varieties that you can't just pick up at the store, supporting the cultural food needs of others in her community. Through the plant sale, she has met various people who have been thrilled to find a particular plant variety connected to their foodways, which they'd otherwise not



In the barn for the lambing, Hildi and I took a liking to each other, so I tried interviewing her while the other goats chewed on my clothes. She mainly said, “Meh,” but in a really nice way.



Garlic scapes, before fermenting. *Photo courtesy of Sasha Kocho Williams.*



Garlic scapes, mid-ferment. *Photo courtesy of Sasha Kocho Williams.*



Ayvar as one of the selections in a meze platter. *Photo courtesy of Sasha Kocho Williams.*

seen among the more usual North Country produce. “You have the long, light purple Thai eggplant my mom wants!” a visitor exclaimed one year, and she has returned to seek it out again since. Another happened across the sale with her mother and aunt, and the family expressed great joy at finding mint and Za’atar thyme, letting Sasha know that they would now be able to cook a lot of things that are special to them from their Lebanese background.

Though not a feature of the plant sale, Sasha has also been able to support local cultural foodways by providing goats to families in need of Halal meat, which is otherwise extremely difficult to access in the area. Sometimes it is not the locally rare variety of plant, or the option to raise and harvest meat in culturally appropriate ways, that is out of reach for someone in the community. Just managing a garden can in itself become overwhelming for many who have long valued growing food as part of their cultural practices. For instance, Sasha’s help with growing plant starts from an elderly neighbor’s own chosen seeds has been a boon to him, as he gardened for many years but lately had found the physicality of it more challenging. These are just a few notable examples of how relatively small-scale acts can offer cultural and emotional lifelines to a variety of people who struggle to meet food-related needs.

And they’re just a few highlights amid the ongoing whirlwind of Sasha’s work at Small Change Farm. As Sasha explained, “We started off doing this for our health, and our spiritual health, in terms of wanting to contribute to a better world and a better future and

a more sustainable food production system. The name of our farm, Small Change Farm, [means], ‘Be the change you want to see, even if it’s small.’ And also we *are* small change! So we do it for ourselves, and hopefully, this sounds corny, but hopefully to be an example or an inspiration and show people that you can do a lot with not very much.” It’s clear that they are contributing to a better future in these ways and more, and that they’re doing so in a way that also supports the nourishment and joy that come from their own and other community members’ past experiences and deep-rooted foodways.

As I mentioned, I would have to come back for more of a tour and a proper chat in the weeks following the plant sale, and it was worth the wait. The day I visited included not only a lovely conversation, a tour of the farm, a sample of the refreshing elderberry rose water that Sasha keeps on hand, and a glimpse

into the general abundance and intensity of farm and family life—along with their clear potential to overwhelm as well as delight and nourish—but also the surprise addition of getting to witness a lamb being born. During our conversation, Sasha’s husband came up to the house with news from the barn that this was not a drill, and Sasha jumped up, handed off her toddler to her older daughter, and took off out the door, shouting over her shoulder to me, “It’s a lambing! Want to come?!” I sure did, and it was amazing to behold, as well as it was humbling and sweet to hang out in the barn while Sasha and Ali cared for mama and baby, and while the curious crew of goats and sheep (the “flerd” as Sasha calls them), bumbled about, relentlessly, and yet adorably, nibbling on my clothes and bag. A little while later, she sent me off with an armload of New Zealand spinach and garlic scapes— and a mind full of appreciation and wonder

at the work that goes into, and the meaning that comes out of, her work at Small Change Farm, just down the path beyond the “Plant Sale Today!” sign. ▼

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New York, Canton, NY) from 2014 to 2020, and the director of TAUNY’s Folk to Table traditional foodways initiative in 2021. She took part in directing the Sustainability Program at St. Lawrence University (Canton, NY) over the following two years, and is now Assistant Director of Advising, Retention, and Student Success at St. Lawrence, where she also teaches periodically. Photo courtesy of the author.



Sasha dives into the garlic scapes to pick a load to send home with me. Twist my arm.

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