



Urban farmer Aldo Sauro finds his calling

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AUG 14, 2014

12:00 AM

On a Monday afternoon in early July, Aldo Sauro's card table at the East Liberty Farmers Market is an array of fava beans, lettuce, basil and raspberries in foam containers. Next to the table, seedlings of fig and peach trees, grape vines, raspberry canes and Lily of the Valley are planted in thick clay soil hemmed into the cut-off bottoms of two-liter soda bottles.

"Look at how nice those raspberries are. Like jewels," he says. He's wearing a red polo shirt with a wet bandana wrapped around his neck. He holds up a hand stained blue and red. He smiles crookedly, lifting his faint white mustache and crinkling his eyes. "Fresh as you're going to get."

His raspberries are gems of fruit concentrate. Deeply sweet and tart, they're much more intense than anything you'd buy at the grocery store. Next to them, the plump fava beans are nearly bursting from their hairy pods. "This year, best ever," he says. "The beans, they're perfect. Better than steak.

Where I come from, everybody loves them. It's harder to grow them here, but I do.”

Now 70, he moved from his native Calabria to Carrick with his father when he was 13; the rest of his family joined the duo a few years later. "My home province I only have one word for: beautiful," he says of Italy's most southern mainland region.

The jagged toe of Italy's boot is best known for its rugged terrain and deeply entrenched poverty. Still, despite that it's almost all mountains and hills, Calabria is home to a powerhouse agricultural tradition. "Even though we are very poor, we are used to eating the very best," he says.

Olive trees stud the hills, and the province's bergamot — a variety of orange prized for its intoxicating oil that you know as the flavor of Earl Grey tea — is reputed to be the best in the world. *Njuda*, soft sausage made from pork scraps and trimmings, is a Calabrian specialty. The region's poverty also is responsible for a culture that fosters reliance on home and community gardens. That tradition of growing what was needed for the family table is something that many of these immigrants, including his family, brought with them to America.

"My father raised seven of us on the food that he grew," he says.

In fact, his father's determination to feed his family goes back to Calabria. "His family were butchers. His daddy used to buy goats and sheep from us back in Calabria," says Fenice Mercurio of Bethel Park.

"My mom knew his mom. And their moms were friends," she says. And although she doesn't see Mr. Sauro very often anymore (she remains close with Mr. Sauro's sister), the two share a passion for continuing their Old World traditions right here in Pittsburgh; Mrs. Mercurio and her husband, Nicola, grow a gorgeous home garden that could easily fool someone into thinking they're home in Calabria.

Says Mary Menniti of the Italian Garden Project, "They're very proud of their agricultural traditions. They have to be working hard or they wouldn't respect themselves. And there's also a satisfaction from growing and eating your own food."

Especially prized tradition is the growing of figs -- one so intense that immigrants were inspired to smuggle saplings of their prized trees to their

new homes in the United States. These trees, as well as fig trees from other regions of Italy and from California, stud the lawns of Carrick, Sewickley and other neighborhoods settled long ago by newcomers longing for a reminder of home. The fig-growing tradition has strengthened over the years, but because the trees aren't suited to a Northeastern climate -- snow and wind mean death for a fig tree -- they are challenging to maintain.

The easiest way to keep a fig tree alive is to grow it in a large pot and let it hibernate in an unheated garage all winter long. However, these trees grow small and don't produce many figs. More ambitious Northeastern fig growers wrap the trees like mummies in burlap, which protects them from the wind, but only provides some insulation from the cold. That method works in a mild winter, but not in a harsh one.

The most reliable way to protect fig trees are to bury them. It takes considerable effort to wrap the trees, snap-pop-snap nearly all of their roots until they're holding on by a thread and then entomb the trees in a temporary grave. It sounds absurd, but it works. Even in a polar vortex.

"The figs? They're tough," Mr. Sauro says.

Until this year, he had more than 100 fig trees on his farmette. The punishing winter of 2014 damaged many of the trees, but, because he buried them, nearly every tree is rebounding, even if they won't bear as much fruit this season as they normally do. The limited quantities are worth seeking out at the East Liberty (Monday), Carrick (Wednesday), Bloomfield (Thursday) and North Side (Friday) Citiparks farmers' markets.

"He's a great part of the market. I come from Italian descent, too, and it's nice to see that [figs] at the market," says Citiparks Market Supervisor Mirella Ranallo. She says that Mr. Sauro he's vended top-quality fruits and vegetables at the markets since before she started working for the city, which was 16 years ago.

"He has the fig leaves on the plate and puts the figs on top of the leaves. It's the way my mother used to do it," she says.

Mr. Sauro spent 20 years selling life insurance for Western-Southern Insurance Co. before deciding to become a farmer at age 50. "This is what I've always been meant to do. I've been a farmer my whole life. I learned from my family."

He's unmarried, has no children and helps his sister take care of his 90-year-old mother. Beyond that, like many others of his generation who emigrated from Calabria, he is reticent to talk about his personal life.

"Me? I'm just a farmer. That's all they need to know about me," he says. "People want to know how the food is grown and is it fresh."

"Sometimes you'll see him talking to a few people but mostly he keeps to himself and sells his stuff," says Ms. Ranallo.

John Heidelmeier, who worked as a chef at several Pittsburgh restaurants including Bar Marco and Soba before moving home to Texas, says he found Mr. Sauro to be a "cool guy with great product. Every time I bought a plant he just said 'Thank you and good luck.'" Now, a peach tree and a fig Mr. Sauro sold to Mr. Heidelmeier are producing fruit in Austin.

Mr. Sauro farms on a little less than two acres of heavily intercropped land, where pole beans grow with lettuce and the fava beans that were so popular this spring are now teaming with tomato and eggplant. His land-management practices are a reminder that permaculture and organic farming, while adopted and adapted to modern constructs, are really rooted in timeless, intuitive traditions of Native Americans and Italian subsistence farmers. "I gave the soil food, and now the soil gives us food," he says.

He isn't an eco-warrior surfing the Internet reading "Modern Farmer" and "Grist," trying to save the planet through organic farming, but he's keenly aware of how conventional farming is affecting the plate and planet. "Non-organic is no good. It's fast, sure, but it's like using steroids. What you get is big, but it doesn't taste good and it isn't good for you." He adds, "The chemicals go downriver and kill the fish."

He doesn't take a day off during the growing season, working 12-hour, seven-day weeks.

"I'm always busy," he says. That's because he grows up to 50 crops a year on his small plot. He even has 16 corn plants, though he says, "the corn is for me."

A typical day begins at 8, when he walks the garden and, if he's going to market that day, harvests what he's going to sell. "Remember, the most important thing for me is fresh. So I pick everything the day of the market."

On non-market days, he weeds, eliminates pests, and, if he needs to, plants new crops. And sometimes, he just stands there. "It's beautiful. I love to just look at everything."

It's not just beautiful, but it also connects him to a landscape and tradition that he left behind as a teenager. "The garden is so sensory. Those memories are in it. Smell, feel, dirt. It's a powerful link to the past, and the life they left behind," says the Italian Garden Project's Ms. Menniti.

Quick-witted and hyper-aware, Mr. Sauro prefers to farm in quiet solitude. When the winds of November signal winter's return, he's there, alone, burying all the fig trees on his land. It can take up to a month. He gives himself a break in December and January. "In the winter, I sleep."

It's a quick sleep. By February he's working again, prepping his land and starting seeds, many of which he's imported from Italy or saved from the previous year's crop. And when the Citiparks markets open again for the new season, he'll be there as he has for all these years, standing behind his brown card table and sending off customers with a quick "Thank you and good luck!" as they carry away a small piece of his Calabria.

First Published August 14, 2014, 12:00am