

The Corn Patch

In *The Story of Corn*, Betty Fussell tells how, in 1948, a couple of Harvard graduate students found some tiny cobs of popcorn in a cave in New Mexico. They dropped a few kernels into a hot pan and watched them pop — 3,000 years after cave dwellers must have harvested them.

Indians were cultivating corn as early as 5,000 BC. Botanists believe that corn evolved from a wild grass, which somehow mutated, changing its sexual organs. While the tassel full of male pollen remained at the top of the stalk, the female organ — a cob lined with hundreds of flowers — moved down to the center of the stalk, where its silks could literally be showered with pollen.

Corn sex is quite incredible, really. Each flower on the cob sends out a silk, or style, to collect a grain of pollen, whose nucleus divides, the first twin tunneling down the style, the second sliding down right behind to fertilize the egg. According to Michael Pollan in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, each plant can contain 14 to 18 million grains of pollen. So pollination was never a problem. The only catch was, the kernels were encased in a tough husk that prevented germination — unless planted by some human hand.

Thus began the marriage of people and corn, which, for millennia, built civilizations, from the Maya and Inca, who worshipped corn as their gods, to contemporary American farmers, who are being strangled by a hybrid gone haywire. As Pollan writes, the descendants of the Maya sometimes say, “I am corn walking,” to acknowledge how central maize is to their diet and culture.

The Indians were the first hybridizers, sprinkling pollen from one plant over the silks of another, and selecting the plants with the best drought tolerance, or texture for corn meal, or resistance to disease. When the Indians shared these varieties with the first colonists, they handed the white conquerors the key to what has become the monster of American agriculture. Modern hybrids

increased yields and adapted to chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the legacy of the wartime petrochemical industry. Soon, government subsidies provided another kind of fertilizer.

So then, of course, the question became, what to do with all the corn? Well, we are eating it, as Pollan tells us. It's not only in all those factory-fed cattle, which evolved to eat grass but are fattened on corn (which makes them sick, so they are given antibiotics and then slaughtered early, before they die). But corn is also poured into factory-fed chickens and hogs, farmed salmon and tilapia. It's in cow's milk and cheese. It's in all those sodas and fruit juices sweetened with corn syrup, in hamburger buns and Twinkies, catsup, and a myriad of other processed foods. Corn is also in plastics and pesticides and the very walls of your house.

We are corn walking.

This summer, while on vacation in Delaware, I couldn't find a single ear of Silver Queen, the sweet corn that used to be sold from just about every farmstand on the Eastern Shore. We used to grow it on our own 120-acre farm in Maryland, where my grandparents once sustained their family by raising beef cattle, pigs, chickens, and milk cows. They grew their own grain, they fertilized the fields with manure and cover crops, they tended a large garden and woodlot. But though Dad loved the farm, he worked in the city, and rented the fields to the Lippy boys, who were always on the cutting edge of modern agriculture. We kept a small patch of sweet corn, though, and a large garden, and enough animals to have beef, chicken, and home-cured ham. I didn't realize I was a member of a vanishing tribe of farmer-gardeners, who loved the race of getting a vegetable just plucked from the earth on the table and into the mouth as soon as possible.

We could taste the earth in the potato, the sun in the corn.

But now, Silver Queen has given way to

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white varieties that contain the so-called sugar gene, which keeps the kernels from turning so quickly to starch. “They last longer and people like that,” the manager at a farmstand told me last summer. “You can put them in the crisper for a week.”

That's when my partner and I decided to grow our own patch of Silver Queen corn. We planted about 20 rows of it, right across from the genetically modified corn the Lippy Brothers grow now in the fields my brother owns. It came up beautifully, tall and straight, and thankfully, variable. Some stalks were shorter than others; some had two ears, some only one. It leaned over in a rainstorm and had to be propped back up. Just as the ears of our sweet corn were forming, the deer discovered them, so I sprayed them with Deer Stopper, a repellent invented by an orchardist who realized that deer hate the smell of peppermint and rosemary. And then we harvested those sweet, tender ears.

Across the road, the corn marched in military rows, tall and straight, over hills unbroken by fields of wheat or oats or cover crops that would let the land rest.

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