
WALKING THROUGH A GARDEN ON YOUR TONGUE: ORGANIC FARMER, EVA SOMMARIPA

BY KAROLINE BOEHM-GOODNICK

Low rock walls define the landscape of this region in southeastern Massachusetts. They sometimes appear to have been hastily assembled, but looks can be deceiving. Many have remained in place since pioneers cleared these fields centuries ago. Silos and treetops line the horizon, a sharp contrast from urban Boston, only an hour's drive away.

The gravel road winds its way through vast lawns strewn with riding mowers and abandoned cars. Perhaps in an effort to keep strangers away, the houses are not clearly marked, but three giant greenhouses provide the clue that you have arrived at Eva's Garden.

Eva Sommaripa, an energetic and youthful 65, has been providing local chefs and specialty stores with organic herbs, greens, and flowers for more than 30 years. Within the restaurant community, Sommaripa is cherished as much as her products, which adorn the plates of restaurants such as No. 9 Park, Tosca, Via Matta, Grill 23, Excelsior, and Upstairs on the Square.

Inside her small farmhouse, she sits at her dining room table, gabbing on the phone with a Volkswagen dealer. Diesel would be ok, but vegetable oil is even better, she tells him. Dressed from head to toe in monochromatic brown, the only splash of color comes from bright blue socks and a neon pink hanky. Dark curls, highlighted with flecks of white, bounce up and down while her muddy fingers scrawl notes on a piece of paper. Hanging up the phone, Sommaripa turns to one of her growers, now lounging in a chair with antelope horns, and announces, "You might feel better if you're out there working in the rosemary. It's therapeutic, you know." The house is filled with large gilded antique mirrors and dark oil paintings, which contrast sharply with the stainless steel shelving that houses seedling planters in the dining room. A long, narrow office is cluttered with stacks of papers, adjacent to the tiny room affectionately known as "the bum bumper kitchen." Sommaripa's organic convictions paper the walls. A sign in the restroom asks guests to, "Please turn off the light," gently reminding everyone that electricity in eastern Massachusetts comes from coal and oil. Piles of corks and jars

of bacon fat will soon act as kindling for the wood stove which not only heats her home but provides an additional cooking surface.

Farmer and politician are not the sole facets of Sommaripa. Since her produce is seasonal and highly perishable, she regularly plays the role of a salesman, calling chefs and convincing them to edit their menus based on her crop. Executive Chef of Upstairs on the Square, Steven Brand, admits, "Sometimes we create dishes to use her products. She gives me a heads up that something is going to be good, and I can start running the dish with someone else's products that are not as good. When her stuff comes in, it's even better."



Grill 23 and Bar Executive Chef Jay Murray echoes those sentiments. In a recent article in the Trustees of Reservation newsletter he writes, "She grows the most wonderful and delicate herbs, and we work together to match local ingredients and menus." The trick to keeping her customers happy is to always stagger the plantings. That way Sommaripa is never without product to sell, and restaurant menus can maintain consistency.

The spring season means that annual maintenance work is put aside and emphasis returns to farming. The first significant crops of the year manifest themselves as "spring dug" vegetables. Hardy roots like parsnips, Jerusalem artichokes, and salsify weather the winter buried underground. Spring thaw signifies that it is time to dig them up, producing all-natural autumn vegetables many months after reaching physiological ripeness.

Tulips might be the quintessential indicator that spring has arrived. Last fall, Sommaripa's Farm Manager, Chip Higgins, and wife, Rennie, planted 10,000 tulip bulbs on their property down the road. Sold mainly for ornamental purposes, these organic flowers are not only beautiful but delicious. Sommaripa describes the petals as "sweet lettuce" which can float on soup or give color to a salad when tomatoes aren't yet ready. The Dutch are even rumored to eat the bulbs in place of onions.

Beyond fall tubers and spring flowers, April's greenhouses



are filled with baby lettuces like mâche and spicy sylvetta (a form of wild arugula) along with Red Russian kale. The winter of 2006 was so warm that even delicate lemon balm survived long into December. If the trend continues, March may bring multitudes of “volunteers,” Sommaripa’s term for plants which spring up without being planted.

In the last 10 years, the demand for organic ingredients has increased exponentially, which has guaranteed Sommaripa a strong market. But life hasn’t always been easy. Early on, there were only a few restaurants and small grocery stores with a market for organic goods; Bread and Circus and Le Jardin were amongst her earliest customers. Even though Sommaripa claims that her “needs are very simple,” and her no frills home proves that, it has sometimes been difficult to make ends meet. The struggles in her professional life parallel those of her personal life. She raised two boys, Leo and Niko, on a grower’s income while facing the difficulties of her husband, George’s, illnesses.

“He was a great appreciator of food,” says Sommaripa of her late husband, George. He was both a source of emotional support and the brains behind the business. A survivor of childhood polio, George was unable to help with the physical demands of the farm. In the late nineties, severe battles with recurring pneumonia left him with a feeding tube. He passed away in 2001, a mere five years after Eva overcame breast cancer. Deeply spiritual, Eva perseveres through what she calls, “a powerful affinity for the wonders and beauties of nature.”

It was that search for beauty in art that led Sommaripa out

of her native Wisconsin in the early 1960s. Bouncing around schools, she ended up at the Rhode Island School of Design, learning to create the pottery which still surrounds her home. A stroke of fate led the blooming artist to Allen’s Pond, a salt marsh close to the farm. Having fallen in love – with both the place and a man — she searched for a way to stay. Sommaripa found the answer in organic farming.

Walking through the original two acres – a small portion of the 24 mostly wooded acres that she now owns – frequent visitors to Sommaripa’s home can almost visualize the evolution of life at Eva’s Garden. The original house she occupied with George sits next to a cabin built by the couple. Across several cultivated plots lies an old barn which is now becoming the heart of a much needed addition. Money earned through a grant helped to begin the building process several years after Eva was widowed.

Today, four full time workers, all under 30 and ripe with enthusiasm, are carrying organic farming into the next generation. Didi Emmons, active at both Veggie Planet in Cambridge and Hayley House Café in Roxbury, often lends a hand — that is, when she isn’t hard at work testing recipes. During one visit, Emmons arrives with arms overflowing with multiple gallons of cider vinegar and sandwiches from Hayley House. “Eva doesn’t go shopping,” says Emmons, “So this has to last a while.” In fact, Sommaripa consumes very little that isn’t grown on her land. According to Emmons, “She just eats grains, herbs, and greens...no sugar. She has a list from the Audubon Society of fish which are ok to eat. She rarely eats any meat...unless someone hits a deer.”

Sommaripa walks into a greenhouse, her entourage for the day not far behind, and stops short to squish an aphid between her thumb and index finger. Plucking a leaf from the ground and grinning, she says, “You don’t even need vitamins if you eat this stuff.” Sommaripa moves on to the next specimen and bends over the ground. Hanky in one hand, seed catalogs in the other, she plucks some aromatic herbs from the dirt and says, “We just love growing things! We are plant people.” □

*While you can’t walk through Eva’s Garden yourself, her products can be found at many fine retailers, including Whole Foods Market (15 Washington St., Brighton, 617-738-8187) and Formaggio Kitchen (244 Huron Ave., Cambridge, 617-354-4750) and on many restaurant menus throughout the greater Boston area.

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