

# FARM AND THE CITY

## URBAN AGRICULTURE

BY AMELIA LEVIN



Concrete jungle. Urban jungle. Whichever term you prefer, they both clearly describe the strip of land, about 10 square-miles to be exact, surrounding Division Street just east of the Kennedy expressway. The long street starts east at the lake with historic homes of the Gold Coast, heads west through the strip of bars where raucous parties rage through the night, past Clark and State Streets where the buses chug noisily along, and next to the high-rise buildings of the Cabrini Green housing project development, where fires have battered the outside, once-white walls, and windows remain boarded up.

These days, across the street from Cabrini, tall cranes and wrecking balls have entered the foray, a sign of what's to come in this concrete space—the hub of whirlwind change, economic tension, racial tension, crime, violence, poverty, wealth, affluence, gentrification, certainty and uncertainty. And in the middle of it all, like a quiet child among chattering, anxious adults, sits a little farm.

For the greater part of the decade, City Farm has served as a sanctuary for peace and calmness amidst the ongoing commotion around it. The roughly one-acre plot of green land, born out of the rubble of asphalt and stone beneath it, somehow seems to soak up the sounds of blaring sirens, roaring bulldozers, and honking cars passing quickly by. Set foot into the patch of garden and for a moment you forget about the places you need to be, the people you need to see. You think instead of heirloom tomatoes and organic peapods. You think of bright, purple beets.

Ken Dunn, director of The Resource Center, a not-for-profit environmental educational organization on city's far south side, started the City Farm project as an extension of the Center's dedication to transforming vacant, concrete lots, mostly in under-developed neighborhoods, into small, sustainable farms producing organically grown fruits and vegetables. This idea behind this practice, commonly known as "urban agriculture," is to not only create more green space in an urban landscape, but also to provide healthy, nutritious foods to people who might have more difficulty accessing them.

Tim Wilson, City Farm manager who also oversees other urban agriculture projects at the

Photographs: Carole Topalian

Resource Center, says City Farm started out as a “moveable feast” of sorts, a mobile market with the potential to relocate to other plots when the vacant spots they call home get sold. “The evolution of City Farm was that the Resource Center, since the early 70s, took city waste and food scraps, turned it into soil, and created community gardens out of them where volunteers could help manage the garden,” Wilson says. “But in establishing City Farm, we proved that we can have a business name with a business model, and it essentially became a full-scale market.”

## RESTAURANT REGULARS

City Farm not only nourishes the folks from surrounding communities, but also regularly supplies fruits and vegetables to high-end, Chicago restaurants. In fact, Wilson says, 80 percent of City Farm’s business, in the form of 11,000 pounds of produce, comes from long-standing relationships with notable restaurants, including Frontera Grill/Topolobampo, North Pond, Eli’s, Scoozi, and others.

“We’ve moved up from being a community garden to working with restaurants and having consistent buyers for produce, so they’re pivotal in allowing us to function as a working business,” Wilson says. “Last year we worked with about 20 restaurants, and we also sell to Irv & Shelly’s Fresh Picks, which is a home delivery service, and Green Grocer (gourmet food shop and market). We get a lot of interest from new businesses every year.”

Rick Bayless, who in addition to heading up acclaimed restaurants Frontera Grill and Topolobampo, started Frontera Farmer Foundation in 2003, a nonprofit organization that helps secure grant money for local farms as well as provide educational and training resources for smaller farms like City Farm. Bill Shores, who runs the restaurants’ production garden in Bucktown, which Bayless says produces about \$25,000 of produce a year, has donated a half-day each month

to work with the City Farm team to refine gardening practices and business methods. Bayless’ team has purchased varieties of tomatoes, squash blossoms, cucumbers and other vegetables from the farm.

He has also worked with the farm to grow tomatillos for the restaurant.

“I’m a huge supporter of urban agriculture,” Bayless says. “Many people when they hear the word ‘agriculture’ might think of farms in far off places, but that’s not the case at all. One of the reasons The Resource Center chose the Cabrini Green area was because it was a really troubled neighborhood, and by bringing agriculture into it you change the whole dynamic of the community. The biggest problem for a lot of people in at-risk neighborhoods is that they can’t get fresh foods. Often, there are no grocery stores in the immediate area and you’re stuck having to go long distances or buy from convenience stores.”

For Bruce Sherman, chef and owner of North Pond in Lincoln Park, City Farm, simply put, provides high-quality, great produce. “It’s delicious,” Sherman says. “I don’t get produce from certain places just because they’re doing the right thing. That product, first and foremost, needs to be exceptional. After that, the fact that City Farm grows exceptional produce the right way only makes it taste better.”

## LOCAL FEASTS

While there’s been an explosion of interest in local, seasonal food among high-end restaurants, that interest has trickled down to the consumer level too. “We’ve gotten more customers from the neighborhood in the last few years,” Wilson says. “We have always had our regular customers from the community coming to the farm. A predominant amount are food-focused people, but then there are others who are just interested in supporting us.”

City Farm’s bounty begins in the spring with arugula, Asian greens,

Tim Wilson, City Farm manager, explains the origin of the project, which dates back to the 1970’s.



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Photo by Carole Topalian

and other lettuces and micro greens, Wilson says. “In the early summer we harvest peas, cabbage, zucchini some tomatoes, but later in the season we have melons and as many as 30 different heirloom tomato varieties,” he says. Hot and sweet peppers usually pop up in late July, and last year the farm also offered about 30 different varieties of that produce as well, in addition to eggplant, Swiss chard, kale, and mustard greens. The fall gives way to root vegetable season with beets, turnips, and some early potatoes. During the colder, winter months, the farms sell bulk firewood made from recycled oak trees.

“We do grow year round with single plastic greenhouses heated by the sun,” Wilson says, adding that the farm does not use any electricity or machinery. “During the year, we also do a lot of food scrap pick ups to create the soil we’re using.”

You’d think solar energy, organic growing methods and soil production would translate into higher produce prices, but it doesn’t. “Our prices are very comparable to produce from the Dominick’s across the street at Clybourn and Division,” Wilson says. And while you’d find your traditional produce varieties, the farm has some fun too. “We grow specific foods based on community interest, but even more now that we’ve gotten to know our community. We definitely have more customers who enjoy working with us.”

The urban farm’s setup is simple and rustic, reminiscent of rural, Midwestern scenes where you might see abandoned barns and rusted farming equipment remain scattered throughout fields. Here in this small plot of land you’ll find rows of brown soil beds with vegetables that start as baby green leaves and blossom into vines of ripening treats in the summertime, offset by an old pickup truck that’s been converted into a shelter of sorts. Colorful signs with catchy phrases and caricatures of smiling vegetables line the fence encircling the space, enticing passers-by to stop in and enjoy, literally, the fruits of their own community’s labor. An opaque tent glides along the Division Street edge, peppered with tools and other props, while at the other end, a wooden shack serves partly as a virtual “office” for the small management team of four, full-time farmers.

The bulk of City Farm’s help, Wilson says, comes from the multitude of volunteers who stop by the farm on Saturdays, or from buses carting groups of school children, church goers, and others who have come to help out and learn about organic farming. In addition, the farm hires paid interns from the neighborhood each year, mostly young people. “We hired more than 50 teenagers over the last eight years as well as some adults,” Wilson says. “We work with after-school programs associated with Cabrini Green as well as local area councils to recruit interns.”

### BUILDING A FUTURE

The sounds of construction crews hammering away and tall cranes soaring through the air near City Farm indicate that this community employment and support could change in years soon to come. The emerging condos and townhomes advertised in signs posted along Division Street seem to grow taller everyday, promising to deliver a new, luxurious neighborhood on the outskirts of Old Town complete with new shops, eateries, and other signs of spreading affluence.

Wilson, though, remains confident that the farm will be around for the long haul, even amidst the dust and rubble that’s been kicked up around it, and as the white towers of Cabrini Green await the wrecking balls that eventually will come.

“Right now we’re sitting on an 8 million dollar lot,” Wilson says.

“The reason we’ve been able to stay is because of the strong partnership we have cultivated with the city of Chicago after 30 years of support.”

But the deal is, Wilson says, the city owns that land and will eventually sell. At the moment, the Cabrini Green buildings aren’t expected to come down for at least another few years, maybe as many as six years, he says. But when they do, and the city sells City Farm’s lot, the city will likely find another place for the farm that started off as mobile to begin with, Wilson says. “We’ve moved twice since being in the Cabrini Green location,” he says. The farm moved from a lot just north of where it sits now in 2003.

In the meantime, as the condos go up around it, Wilson says, “There’s definitely going to be a lot more eyes on us. The appearance of the farm I think will have to change. But hopefully the support from the developed area will allow us to expand our garden and improve our farming methods.”

The concern, however, is not to change too much. “What I’m worried about is I just want to have enough available for the other members in the community, those who have been buying our produce for some time. There are huge differences in income among our neighbors and we just want to be able to supply to everyone,” Wilson also hopes to counteract any concerns that the Farm is just “squatting on a piece of land,” and to continue to support the neighborhood by providing the same jobs and opportunities it always has.

“Clybourn is commonly thought of as the border between the Gold Coast and Cabrini, and we’re right in the middle,” Wilson says. “We’re trying to represent all sides well and I hope that we can still make everyone feel comfortable as our walk-ins from the neighborhoods increase. We don’t want to be an exclusive part of the Gold Coast and become something that shoves people away from housing projects.”

A meeting in the middle of a fast-paced, complex, and constantly changing environment, City Farm reminds us of the magic behind seeing the food we eat grow from the earth. We see a blossoming tomato turn from green to ripe red, pick it off the vine, hold it in our hands, and taste the summer. Watching something so simple in life, yet so complex, never fails to capture our spirit of contentment and pleasure, just as City Farm in its literal presence has captured the souls of its surrounding community and greater urban area.

“Healthy food comes from healthy communities, and once you have people growing their own things, the dynamic of the neighborhood changes,” Bayless says. “People start seeing things in a different way. As living beings we need to be close to the source of our food, especially in urban areas. Planting a seed and watching it grow makes us all connected to nature.”

*City Farm, located at 1204 N. Clybourn Ave., is open on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. To volunteer at the farm on Saturdays, send an email to [cityfarmchicago@gmail.com](mailto:cityfarmchicago@gmail.com) or stop by the farm and ask for one of the farmers.*

*Amelia Levin is a freelance food/dining writer and editor ([www.amelialevin.com](http://www.amelialevin.com)) based in Chicago with training in hard news reporting and business journalism. Currently, Amelia is attending culinary classes at night to hone her cooking skills. Outside of work and class, she enjoys all things epicurean and frequents the Green City Market as often as the weather allows.*



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