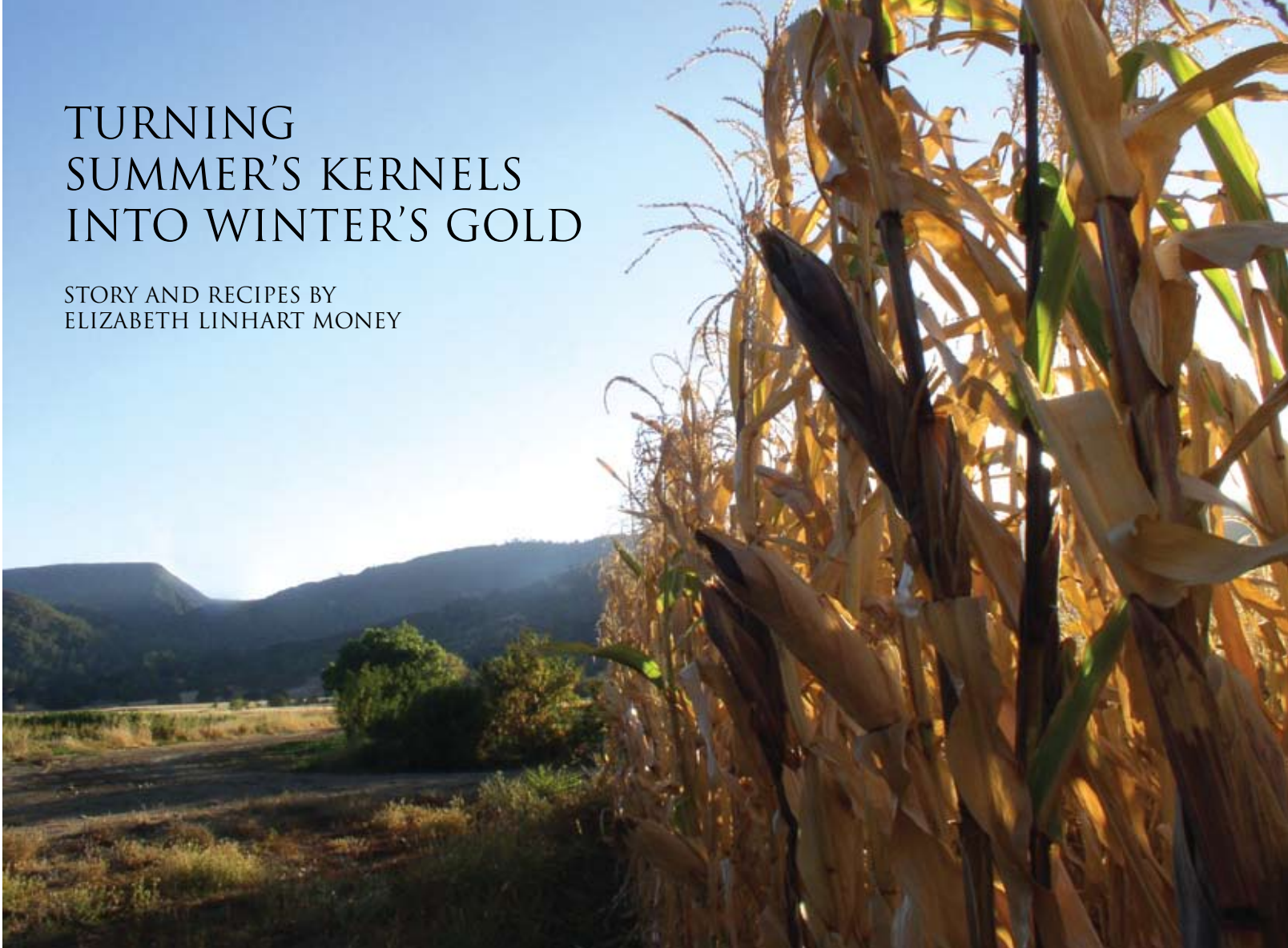


TURNING SUMMER'S KERNELS INTO WINTER'S GOLD

STORY AND RECIPES BY
ELIZABETH LINHART MONEY



It's a hot, dusty September day at Full Belly Farm. Rich Leavey crouches down to examine a few dry-looking ears of corn piled at the foot of the sun-bleached field. One ear of Hopi Blue catches his attention. With kernels alternating red, burgundy, and crimson, the appearance is a warmer, richer texture than he's accustomed to seeing on this variety. After examining it for a few seconds, Leavey surmises that some brightly varied Fiesta corn must have lent its warmer yellows and deeper browns to this plant. "What's really appealing," he says with the measured New England enthusiasm that betrays his Vermont roots, "is getting these unique off-types that you haven't seen before." He then adds, "I'm going to have to save some seed off of this!"

In today's world of genetic engineering, it is refreshing and reaffirming to see such delighted surprise in a marvel that nature offers up all on its own, and on an ear of corn, no less. Of late, corn seems to be the poster child for all that's wrong with the industrial food system, whether it is Monsanto's Bt Corn or end products like high-

fructose corn syrup (the alleged culprit in the obesity epidemic) and ethanol (seen by many as our *deus ex machina* out of the energy crisis). Corn is an ancient food and a basis of the traditional diet and system of agriculture in Mesoamerica. Coevolving with corn were beans and squash. Known as "The Three Sisters," this triad provides a full nutritional complement of amino acids, fiber, and a host of vitamins and minerals. The sisters also work symbiotically in the garden: Corn offers its stalk for the bean to climb, the beans fix nitrogen in the soil to provide fertility, and the squash gives ground cover, helping to retain moisture in the soil and protecting all three from the invasion of weeds.

"Corn is a heavy feeder, needing a lot of nitrogen," says Leavey, explaining that at Full Belly they tried the traditional Three Sisters plan, interspersing beans directly with corn. "It was a nightmare for harvesting," he says, adding that the arrangement is better suited for home gardens. Instead he has planted cranberry beans and the tiny Trail of Tears heirloom beans in large swaths between the corn.

OLD-FASHIONED STOVETOP POPCORN

This Native American treat is low in fat, high in fiber, and a healthy snack option. Place a heavy-bottomed pot over medium-low heat, add a tablespoon of canola oil and ½ cup popcorn kernels, put the lid on the pot and let pop away. Be sure to shake frequently to keep the kernels at the bottom from burning. (There will always be some unpopped kernels left at the bottom. These are affectionately known as 'old maids.')

Flavor the popped corn with a little olive oil melted with butter or try a sprinkling of nutritional yeast to give your popcorn lots of good B vitamins. Makes approximately 8 cups.



In addition to raising corn that's meant to be eaten fresh, Full Belly Farm produces several varieties that are intentionally allowed to dry: Yellow, a bubblegum pink Strawberry Popcorn, ornamental Fiesta corn, and Hopi Blue. The farm recently added the latter to grind into cornmeal during the slow winter months. "We wanted to start doing more value-added crops," Leavey explains, referring to the practice of increas-

ing return by processing certain crops into packaged goods. He expresses surprise at how popular the cornmeal has turned out to be. "Last year we sold out so fast that we had to start grinding the ornamental corn instead," he says. "For some reason, it really clicked with people."

Despite the heat, high sun, and the abundance of tomatoes, melons, and stone fruit ripening on the farm, Full Belly's two-acre cornfield, crackling in the dry wind, seems to whisper the end of summer. Looking over the drying field, Leavey remarks, "Corn is a great end point to a long succession of crops." Once the corn and beans are sufficiently dry to avoid rot, the farm's new harvester will sweep through the field, depositing the sheared kernels and naked beans into bins, while turning the remaining plant matter back into the field. It will rest beneath a cover crop until spring, when a new round of crops will be planted. Next year, the corn will find itself somewhere else on the 200-acre farm, continuing on a complex rotation that keeps Full Belly's soil, livestock, and produce healthy.

WINTER'S WORK

In early February, the farm is quiet. Goats and sheep, heavy in pregnancy, graze fields thick in vetch and clover, and through the damp, dark earth, shoots of tender grass poke up to color the farm's pathways. Meanwhile, cold weather crops like broccoli, kohlrabi, and braising greens thrive amid the bare limbs of fruit trees and grapevines.

Just before lunch, Joaquina Jacobo, dressed in rubber work boots, a full-length apron, and a hooded sweatshirt, fires up the four-foot-high stone grinder. Her job this morning is to grind cornmeal and wheat for this week's CSA boxes. Surrounded by five-gallon buckets of wheat berries, and Hopi Blue corn kernels resembling a wealth of garnets, Jacobo feeds the rumbling grinder. As it gives her violet-colored cornmeal in return, she quietly tells us that her daughter just recently learned how to make cornbread at her local grade school in Guinda.

Jacobo is one of Full Belly's 40 year-round employees. For some

JOHNNY CAKES

Long before the arrival of European settlers in New England, members of Rhode Island's Narragansett tribe made simple cornmeal cakes using ground white flint corn and water. Combined with beans, nuts, and fruits, they were the perfect food to carry on long expeditions, which might be why they came to be called "journey cakes" and later "johnny cakes." The settlers started adding eggs, sour cream, cheese, and baking soda, creating recipes that morphed into cornmeal pancakes and Southern cornbread.

While maple syrup drizzled on top makes them into a sweet treat, consider transforming the johnny cakes into a hearty winter pizza by topping the cooked cakes with thin slices of par-boiled potatoes, cooked shelling beans, fried bacon, braised greens, and a bit of white cheddar. Then throw them into the oven for five minutes, or until the cheese melts.

Makes four 5-inch cakes

1½ cups corn meal

1 teaspoon salt

1¼ cups boiling water

1 egg

½ cup buttermilk

Heat oven to 325°. Place the cornmeal and salt in a cast iron skillet or a heatproof bowl and place in the oven for 5-8 minutes. Remove from the oven when the cornmeal is lightly toasted and add the water. If you are using a skillet, transfer the cornmeal into a bowl, preferably with a spout for easy pouring, before adding the water. Stir vigorously for several minutes, making sure all lumps are whisked smooth. Then add the egg and buttermilk. The batter should be thin and runny.

If it begins to thicken up, add water.

Place a well-seasoned skillet or non-stick pan over medium-high heat and add a small amount of clarified butter, cooking oil, or bacon fat (the more traditional option). When the fat is hot, ladle or pour a quarter of the batter onto the pan. If it looks like the fat is burning or the batter begins to splatter, reduce the heat slightly. After about five minutes, gently flip the cake. It should be golden brown. Remove to a rack to cool and repeat with the remaining batter to make 4 johnny cakes, lightly greasing the pan each time. As with crêpes, the first cake may be less than perfect while the pan is getting to the right temperature.

Wait until the cakes are cool before you stack them. Once cool, "johnny cakes" refrigerate, reheat, and travel well, invoking their Narragansett origins.

SPICED CORN COOKIES

Warm spices and the crunch of cornmeal make these cookies a toothsome treat. They are good stand-alone biscuits, but they really shine when served with ice cream, cranberry preserves, or a velvety chocolate mousse.

1 cup sugar
Zest from 1 medium orange or from 2 small oranges
½ teaspoon vanilla
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1 ½ teaspoons ginger
¼ teaspoon allspice
¼ teaspoon cloves

1 ¼ cups flour
½ cup corn meal
½ teaspoon baking powder
¼ teaspoon salt
12 tablespoons chilled butter, cubed
1 egg
2 tablespoons orange juice

In a food processor, combine sugar, zest, vanilla, and spices, and mix thoroughly. Blend in the dry ingredients and then scatter the cold butter over the top and pulse until the mixture resembles cornmeal. Add egg and orange juice, blending until the dough comes together into a ball.

Remove the dough from the processor and quickly shape it into a log, touching it as little as possible to keep it cool. Wrap the log in parchment paper, followed by plastic wrap, and refrigerate overnight.

Preheat the oven to 375° and lightly grease two cookie sheets. Remove the dough from the refrigerator and slice into ¼-inch thick rounds. Arrange on baking sheets about 2 inches apart. (The cookies tend to spread.) Bake for 12-15 minutes, exchanging the cookie sheets top and bottom halfway to ensure even browning. Remove from the oven and take cookies off the sheets immediately, placing them on racks to cool.

long-term employees, the farm offers health benefits, something only 19 percent of California's organic farms do, according to a 2005 study at UC Davis. "Providing year-round work is something we are very committed to," explains Judith Redmond, who along with Andrew Brait, Paul Muller, and Dru Rivers founded the farm in 1985. She is standing inside the open barn, keeping warm in a wool sweater. Around her are neatly packed bags of wheat berries, whole-wheat flour, multi-colored popcorn, blue cornmeal, sundried tomatoes and other dried fruit, waiting to be packed into CSA boxes or to be sold at farmers' markets. "We decided to grow grains in part because it was something that could be processed during the off months, providing additional work," she says.

At the height of summer's busy season the farm employs as many as 60 people, most of whom are Mexican immigrants who work by the hour. Full Belly is known for its generous wages and for having helped some workers buy houses in the community. In a 2004 article for the Rodale Institute, Full Belly farmer Paul Muller mused, "Wouldn't it be nice if in the future we judged organic farmers by how well they are taking care of all parts of the agriculture system, making sure farm labor is as healthy and cared for as any aspect of the farm?"

At Full Belly Farm, corn, one of our greatest American treasures, is one means to this end.

Full Belly Farm cornmeal is available at Star Grocery (see ad below) and through the farm's CSA program. csa@fullbellyfarm.com

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We are driven by a passion for food. Through our close relationships with local producers, like Marin Sun, Pitman, Niman, Full Belly, Blue Heron, and Capay Organics, Fra'mani, Phoenix Pastificio, Cowgirl Creamery, Fleur de Lyon, June Taylor Jams, and many others, we are able to offer a fantastic variety of products, augmented by a selection of exemplary imports. Star Meats is a full-service butcher shop and deli with great prepared dishes, house made charcuterie, and the best sandwiches around. Come look around—If we don't have it, we'll find it for you.

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