



STANLEY HUGHES

DOING WHAT'S RIGHT AND GETTING NOTICED

BY NANCIE MCDERMOTT
PHOTOS BY FRED THOMPSON

In the northeastern corner of Orange County, farmer Stanley Hughes sits at his kitchen table on a rainy winter morning, reflecting on how much farm life has changed since his grandfather's time. Much has changed since 1912, when Hughes' grandfather, Fletcher Hughes, founded the family farm. But for Stanley Hughes, much remains the same.

Tobacco is still the bill-paying crop on the 75 acres Hughes has worked since the late 1970s. Nowadays he grows organic tobacco for the Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company, along with a cornucopia of organic produce that he supplies to grateful chefs and sells at farmers markets around the Triangle.

Hughes' farm and produce have earned him high praise and much success since he began working organically in the mid-1990s. In addition to farmers markets, Hughes has supplied his produce and meats to top area restaurants, including Elaine's on Franklin, Lantern, Magnolia Grill, and Watt's Grocery. Since 2000, Hughes and Pine Knot Farm have been singled out on the state and national food and agriculture scenes, beginning with a shout-out for his exemplary collard greens from *Gourmet* magazine in its 2003 produce issue. The following year, the North Carolina Co-Op Extension Service named him the Small Farmer of the Year for 2004. In October, *Bon Appétit* magazine singled him out as one of the Carrboro Farmers' Market's extraordinary vendors of certified organic produce, pasture-raised chicken and pork, and homemade sausage. Slow Food Triangle counts

on him to provide his delicious sweet potatoes, greens, butter beans, broccoli and meats for such events such as the "Farm to Fork" dinner honoring Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini in May of 2007. Hughes was among the local delegation of farmers and food producers that traveled to Turin, Italy, in 2006 for Slow Food's international conference Terra Madre.

Hughes' dedication to organic farming is both old and new; while his farm wasn't officially certified organic until a decade or so ago, it has always been a natural, sustainable enterprise. "We didn't have the money to go out and buy a lot of pesticides," he says with a smile. The youngest of his father Bennie Hughes's 12 children, Stanley Hughes helped the family tackle the problem of weeds the old-fashioned way, working the rows with his hands and a hoe. The old ways have always made sense to him, not simply because of cost but as the key to growing healthful, delicious food. As a third-generation farmer, he continues to farm in the sustainable, environmentally friendly ways his father and grandfather taught him, with the benefit of modern equipment, knowledge, and agricultural practices that make organic farming a viable business.

Hughes takes an active part in Operation Spring Plant, an Oxford-based non-profit dedicated to promoting farming as a business and way of life among minority and poor communities around the country. Deeply proud of his hard-won success in helping keep his own family farm alive and well for three generations, Hughes has

traveled throughout North Carolina and around the country, teaching and encouraging others to start up, expand, and succeed in farming.

Two years ago, Hughes married Linda Leach-Hughes, a Lumberton native who had recently retired from her first career as a Senior Vice President at Robeson Community College. Not one to sit in the porch swing, Leach-Hughes has taken up the challenges of marketing Pine Knot Farm with energy and creativity, working to ensure a second hundred years of success for the family enterprise. In addition to organizing and managing the farm's paperwork and communications, she has concentrated on expanding their presence at farmers market in Durham, Raleigh North Hills, and at two UNC locations, one in the Children's Hospital atrium and the other at the Hedrick Building. "Our farmers market set-up is totally different," Stanley Hughes says with a big smile. "I'm the salvage yard—she's the dealership!" With an eye for color and display, Leach-Hughes sets out bright blue tubs of vibrantly colored vegetables, lining them up on checkered tablecloths and providing business cards and recipes. She's ordered shirts and calendars with a Pine Knot Farm logo, patronizing vendors in Hillsborough, Burlington and Mebane to keep things local.

"Marketing is just recruiting customers, drawing them to our table. I can talk non-stop, and Stanley sits back and lets me go to it!" Her conversation pays off well—recently a bakery-owner in Marysville, Ohio, called up after researching sweet potatoes on the Internet. An Alabama native, she was fed up with the poor excuses for sweet potatoes in her marketplace. After a half-hour conversation with Leach-Hughes, she ordered a 40-pound box of Pine Knot Farm sweet potatoes shipped to her in Ohio, and plans to keep herself stocked up from now on.

A few years ago, Stanley Hughes' sister, Peanella Hughes, moved back to the homeplace, a beautiful white farmhouse their grandfather built, after retiring from her career as an educator. Thanks to the knowledge she gained growing up on the farm, the family farmhouse kitchen is once again a source of home-baked pies, preserves, and more. Using the fruit from trees and vines planted by their grandfather and father, or growing wild on the property, she cooks old-time dishes for the new millennium, picking scuppernong grapes from the arbor, gathering black walnuts and hickory nuts, pears, apples and peaches, and strawberries. She also makes mighty fine sweet potato pies, using sweet potatoes from her little brother Stanley, who's still farming the Hughes family land, right across the road.



Sitting at his kitchen table, Hughes seems like a man in tune with the earth and the world. He's deeply proud and grateful to be doing the work he does, and he hopes that we can educate people to the worthiness of good, natural food. He's certainly doing his part to bring it from the earth to the marketplace; getting it to our tables from farms like his is a privilege indeed. *eP*

Born in Burlington, raised in High Point, **Nancie McDermott** spent three years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand. Her nine cookbooks include *Real Thai: The Best of Thailand's Regional Cooking*, and *Quick and Easy Chinese*, out this fall from Chronicle Books. She lives with her family in Chapel Hill, NC.



SWEET POTATO PIE

If you can make it to the farmers market in Carrboro or Durham on a wintry Saturday morning, treat yourself to a big sack of Stanley Hughes' sweet potatoes and make this classic pie. Many of his pie-making customers like to use his Beauregard variety along with a few O'Henrys. To prepare sweet potatoes for the pie, trim ends and cut into 2-inch lengths. Place in a large saucepan with cold water to cover them, and bring to a rolling boil. Reduce the heat to a gentle boil and cook about 30 minutes, until they are just tender, but still firm. Drain, let stand in cold water until cool enough to touch, peel, and then mash to a smooth puree. Makes one 9-inch pie.

- 1 cup sugar
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 cup evaporated milk or half-and-half
- 2 eggs, beaten well
- 3 tablespoons melted butter
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1½ cups mashed cooked sweet potatoes
- 1 unbaked 9-inch pie crust

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. In a small bowl combine the sugar, cinnamon and nutmeg, and use a whisk or a fork to mix them together well.

In a medium bowl, combine the evaporated milk and the beaten eggs, and stir with a fork or whisk to mix well. Stir in the butter and vanilla, and mix to combine everything evenly and well.

Add the mashed sweet potatoes and the sugar and spice mix to the egg-milk mixture and stir well to bring everything together into a thick, fairly smooth filling.

Transfer the filling to the pie crust and bake for 40 to 50 minutes, or until the filling is firm at the center and puffed up around the edges. (Insert a toothpick or tip of a paring knife near the center; if it comes out clean, the filling is done.) Remove the pie from the oven and set it on a cooling rack or a folded kitchen towel to cool. Serve at room temperature.

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