



THE DIRT ON THE HARVARD FARMER – ERIN WADE

Q. How did you go from the hallowed halls of Harvard to a ten-acre organic farm?

I get asked that a lot, and the truth is it was a very “organic” process that happened over time as I tried to hone in on what my true passions were. I went into pre-med, totally math-science focused, sure I was going to be a surgeon. Near the end of my sophomore year, I had an epiphany that completely changed the trajectory of my life; I realized that I didn’t want to be a doctor and that I craved something less rigid, more creative, more dynamic. I switched majors to English and made plans to pursue fashion design in Milan after I graduated. Harvard doesn’t prepare you for one thing in life – it teaches you how to think analytically and creatively in whatever subject you embrace. And I think my particular education – split as it was between an in-depth study of the sciences and then the humanities – helped foster a certain curiosity and a belief that you can master new subjects and bring fresh approaches by trading across disciplines. That creativity, ideas and curiosity are more important than experience alone.

Q. So how did your Milan experience influence you?

Milan is urban, industrial and bustling and I felt an immediate rush of inspiration for both fashion and cuisine. Italy has an infectious cultural attitude towards pleasure; they embrace it without guilt and believe that you can eat well, stay healthy and be fashionable doing it. This ethos inspired Vinaigrette’s philosophy - that eating well should be fun and delicious. The Vinaigrette menu was influenced by a wonderful pizzeria near my apartment in Milan. Their menu was staggering, offering over a hundred creative combinations like prosciutto and corn, gorgonzola and hazelnut, arugula and prosciutto - a celebration of fresh, delicious ingredients paired in simple, unexpected, creative ways. I was hooked!

Q. Why did Santa Fe beckon?

My mother adored Santa Fe - I think we had the only southwest-style house in rainy Bellingham, Washington - and so growing up I’d spend a lot of time there. When my aunt and uncle moved there, I stayed with them the summer before I went to Milan. I fell madly in love with Santa Fe – the open

space, nature and reconnecting to the Earth. My family had bought property there to use as a family retreat, so after my year in Milan, I made a beeline back to New Mexico.

Q. This must be the dirt part.

Right! There was lots and lots of dirt – 10-acres of it. And there was discarded junk, garbage and piles and piles of brush and debris. And the house – with rooms dating back 300 years – needed lots of renovation and TLC, especially the plumbing. I dug in and began the work and slowly things improved. I loved the at times infuriating but incredibly rewarding process of construction and renovation, and the almost miraculous way in which design choices materialized into beautiful and inviting spaces. During this time I was all alone on ten acres in the high desert. I looked for ways to nurture and nourish myself that were loving and appealing, and when I cooked I almost always made salads.

Q. Salads?

Yes, I began making salads. But these were layered and thoughtful salads; It was like a meditation. I'd chop each ingredient carefully so each bite contained a perfect mix of delicious flavors. I made zippy, bright vinaigrettes and focused more and more on creating unique pairings, adding savory grilled meats and seafood. I began to think of salads as the perfect vessel for bold flavors and appealing textures paired in thoughtful ways. When I'd eat out, the salads at most restaurants seemed lack luster by comparison. When I began planting the land, a wide variety of gourmet, organic greens was the obvious choice.

Q. When did the farming begin?

After the house took shape, I turned my attention to the land. I read voraciously about how to farm organically and (far trickier) how to do it in the high desert with its short growing season, clay-based soil and non-existent humidity. I tested the soil in various plots and seeded Alfalfa as a nitrogen-fixing cover crop to nourish depleted dirt. I bought chickens and goats and learned how to navigate the ancient, New Mexico acequia water system in order to irrigate the land. I began small in areas that had tested as the best soil, and ordered a vast kaleidoscope of seeds from "Seeds of Change". I scoured the internet for advice and began calling myself the Google farmer.

Q. What did you learn?

The great thing about farming is that at the end of the day you just have to do it. You will learn from your successes and failures and get better. And no matter how much you read about the best way to do things, your land has its own microclimate and personality that will require a unique approach. We now grow 70% of the produce we serve in the restaurant (in season, of course) and we installed a 1,200-square foot greenhouse to extend our growing season during the winter. We are growing micro-greens, herbs and other delights for the vinaigrette kitchen.

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