



loosecanon

By Bruce Schimmel

## TALE OF THE PLATE

► **I SOMETIMES LOOK** down at my dinner plate and wonder what my food would say if it could talk. How about that baked potato? What would it say about the soil it grew in, the stuff it sucked up, the people who grew it and shipped it?

I know what I paid for it, but what was the potato's real cost? Did it replenish the earth nearby? Or did it arrive by truck, trailing clouds of carbon? Most of the time, the tale of my plate is pretty spare. Spuds are notoriously mute.

Which is why I love talking to farmers. Farmers who know the lives of their produce, from beginning to end.

Such a farmer is Jonathan Snipes, who has a compelling tale, and a historic one, too. Snipes, his sister, his father, together with a handful of farmhands, run a 150-acre farm in Lower Bucks County that's been in his family since 1848.

But that's only recent history. Snipes' ancestors arrived in 1682; his steel-blue eyes sparkle when he talks about his family's long tradition of Quaker caring.

Today, the Snipes Family Farm is an emerald isle set in a suburban sea. Bordered by housing tracts and highways, it's wedged between Northeast Philly and Trenton. From Center City, it's only 30 minutes up I-95. Which, says Snipes, is good in its own way, because it makes the farm so easy to visit.

Visiting Snipes' farm is free, and popular with school classes and families. People come to pick blueberries and apples, or tour the farm fields and horse pastures with groups. The day I visited, in advance of a soiree, a gaggle of tie-dyed locals meandered around dreamily.

The farm is open, because Snipes is among a growing cadre of farmers who encourage visits, both in person and virtually. Some California growers now arrange real-time video conferences. Farmers like Snipes are proud of their tales, and have nothing to hide.

And that is good, because my confidence in what the government can say about our food safety is at an all-time low. After decades of official negligence, agribusiness is shrouded in secrecy.

In the recent tainted peanut case, it took a team of gastronomic forensic experts to finger the guilty factory. Even now, we don't know where the salmonella originated. The fish we buy may say where it swam. But that only raises more questions, for instance, about the sanitary conditions of waters around Vietnam.

Processed food is even worse. Corporate giants like ConAgra and General Mills now *depend* on consumers to reheat already cooked food — they call it a “kill step” to wipe out lingering pathogens. Even then, *The New York Times* reported that they couldn't bake frozen pot pies into a safe state without blackening crusts.

So I want to hear from people who eat what they sow. Even when their story is less than pristine.

Snipes says that almost everything on the farm — his blueberries, onions and potatoes — are grown naturally. But, he admits, his apple orchards still need an occasional spritz when insects go nuts.

But if Snipes is satisfied with the tales from his own plate, so am I.

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PLANT AND TELL:  
Jonathan Snipes, farmer

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