Whether sweet or decorative, corn is American Indians' gift



M. SPENCER GREEN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Colorful Indian corn — also called ornamental corn — is a popular fall decoration.

BY BILL BUELL
Gazette Reporter

Kay Olan doesn't like the term "Indian Corn." As far as she's concerned, putting the two words together is redundant.

"All corn is Indian corn, 100 percent of it," said Olan, a Mohawk Indian storyteller from Saratoga Springs. "There were plenty of different kinds, and what we grew here in the Northeast was different from what they grew in the Southwest. But it was the Native American who introduced corn to the Europeans, so all corn can be called Indian corn."

What most people today refer to as Indian corn is the kind with colorful kernels used in a decorative manner, often as part of a cornucopia. That corn, however, is the result of genetic modifications of only the past 50 years by product scientists. The Native Americans, meanwhile, started engineering their corn long before the first Europeans traveled on the continent, according to Dave Cornelius, a Schenectady native and Iroquois Indian expert who is of Mohawk descent.

CAN GROW ANYWHERE

"Corn did not exist 5,000 years ago," he said. "What the Native Americans did was take a grass plant called teosinte and cross-pollinate it with other plants, and eventually over time they were growing grasses with small cobs. Over centuries and centuries, more than a thousand years, it developed into what you see today."

Indian corn, or what Richard Ball of Schoharie Valley Farms calls ornamental corn, can be grown by anyone just about anywhere.

"We grow a variety of ornamental corns here, and it's closely aligned with what you might call flint corn or any of the hard-shell corn," said Ball. "You can eat it, but it's hard, and the Indians would grind it down to make corn meal. We also have a variety that is popping corn. People either use it for decoration or they make popcorn with it."

If you're interested in eating Indian corn, Cornelius suggests you stay with the popping variety and avoid making corn meal or corn bread.

"You can buy these small cobs and just throw them in the microwave," said Cornelius. "It works fine. What I wouldn't do is try to make corn meal and eat it. The Indians had a green corn festival and they would eat it raw off the cob, or they would use it for flour. They cooked it by boiling it down, washing it with ashes to give it some flavor, and then boiling it again. It became very heavy and gooey. It might be good for people who are hungry, but I can't eat more than a bite."

Stephanie Shultes, curator at the Iroquois Indian Museum in Howes Cave, agreed that the taste of corn in those days probably wasn't that appealing.

"I'm sure they would have eaten off the cob; that's probably when it tasted the best, but then they would dry the kernels and save them over the winter," said Shultes. "It might look like

See **CORN,** *page B6*



Sara Foss
FOSS FORWARD

Listening to what people think, and why

As we near the election, there's been a distinct uptick in heated political rhetoric, especially on Facebook.

I didn't learn about Romney's "binders full of women" remark from watching the debates, but from Facebook, where people began posting jokes and comments about the phrase within moments of it leaving the Republican candidate's mouth. The Democratic and Republican conventions inspired similar observations and commentary. Even on relatively quiet days, my Facebook page is filled with political chatter, and this chatter ranges from the calm and level-headed to the completely unhinged. (Beware of any post that was written with the caps lock button on.)

For the past few months, one of my friends has been writing essays on various issues — healthcare reform, the economy, the 47 percent comment controversy, etc. — and posting them on Facebook, along with his thoughts on the candidates and their proposals. And he isn't just blowing off steam. He actually believes that he can persuade people to vote for Obama if he lays out reasonable, intelligent arguments for doing so. His goal, he told me, is to convince moderate Republicans to vote against their party.

I tend to doubt that my friend's Facebook posts have the power to change anyone's way of thinking, although I don't completely rule it out, and I wasn't at all surprised when someone he served with in the Air Force unfriended him with a dismissive, "Nobody cares about your political opinions."

"Well, that's the risk of voicing your opinions," I said. "You might lose some Facebook friends." Or real friends, I suppose.

LIFE IN THE VILLAGE

I've never actually unfriended anyone on Facebook, and certainly not over their political opinions, no matter how stupid I find them.

I view Facebook as a village, filled with relatives, friends and acquaintances from various walks of life, and looking at the site gives me a sense of what's going on in the village. I've always been interested in What People Think and Why They Think It, and the village occasionally provides some insight, in addition to making it harder to regard people with different opinions as some sort of hypothetical Other. I don't want to block out the people I don't agree with, or denounce them as WRONG and EVIL — I want to try to understand them.

Which can be hard.

For instance, I was a little baffled when one of my Facebook friends suggested that "The Dark Knight

See **FOSS,** *page B6*



PETER R. BARBER/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Participants try samples of items prepared for trade at the Schenectady Food Swap, organized by the From Scratch Club at the First Unitarian Society of Schenectady.

Starting from scratch

Food swaps inspire people to make and cook food at home

BY JOANNE E. MCFADDEN
For The Daily Gazette

When Christina Davis of Milton had her son, Miles Jae, three and a half years ago, she was confronted with a challenge that she never expected. Miles has severe, life-threatening food allergies. Davis had to rid the house of any allergens, including dairy, soy, tree nuts, peanuts, pea protein, sesame and gluten. Most packaged foods were off limits. "I quickly had to learn to cook most of the 21 meals a week from scratch, quickly," she said.

Thus began a transformation of how her family ate. Feeling alone in what Davis calls her "food journey," she sought out a group of friends who were concerned about feeding their families wholesome foods made from scratch.

They gathered together once a month at a local coffee shop to talk about food, swap recipes and vent, she said. Soon, the once-a-month gatherings weren't enough, so the group started a blog. In June 2010, it made the blog public and birthed the From Scratch Club (FSC).

What started off as a way for Davis to deal with her son's food allergies has blossomed into a new movement in the Capital Region to encourage, support and educate people about making their own food at home.

Now, with its mission of "making food matter, together," the group hosts monthly food swaps, publishes several columns on its blog, demonstrates at farmers' markets, runs a cooking school, hosts an online book club, and broadcasts via podcast, all with the goal of advocating scratch cooking, using local ingredients and connecting with food in different way.

CONSCIOUS CONSUMPTION

"I think people are really trying to get away from consumption that they don't have a hand in," said Amy Halloran of Troy, who writes her own blog as well as contributing to FSC's.

In founding FSC, Davis wanted to help people gain back what they've lost from the increase in packaged and processed foods. "We have lost the critical knowledge and experience to feed ourselves from basic ingredients to completion," she said.

Davis points out several reasons to cook at home, including cost savings, health, taste, the economic impact of buying from local farmers, and the community-building potential of learning how to do it together and sharing the activity of creating from scratch.

Food swaps are one of the main activities of FSC. They're hosted twice monthly in Troy and Schenectady, with swaps occasionally in Saratoga Springs. People bring their homemade items and trade them with others. For example, at the Schenectady swap last month, Deanna Fox of Delanson, who contributes a column to FSC's blog, came with some homemade biscuits and



PETER R. BARBER/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Christina Davis, holds up a cookbook during the Schenectady Food Swap at the First Unitarian Society.

compound butters and hoped to go home with some cocktail bitters and hummus.

Davis brought five canisters of coffee and maple syrup mustard to last month's Troy swap and went home with a loaf of dosa bread, a jar of kimchi, ground coriander, chocolate truffles and a lavender all-purpose cleaning spray.

There are always plenty of unique offerings, such as pumpkin hummus, spicy red pepper sauce, fresh purple carrots, pretzels, coffee liqueur, mulling spices, salted caramel bars, honey-blueberry lemon jam, herbed tomato corn soup, cherry simple syrup, grapefruit soda and fresh herbs, all homemade or home-grown. "People are bringing really creative things there that I would never think to make or eat," said Christine Hmiel of Albany, who hosts FSC's podcasts.

EDUCATIONAL EFFORTS

There's always an educational component at the swaps, too, such as a cookbook author or local foods advocate. Marty Butts of Syracuse, owner of Small Potatoes, a marketing, advocating and consulting firm for small food companies, was a guest speaker at last month's Schenectady swap, as was Jennifer Wilkerson of the Schenectady Green Market, which just became a sponsor of FSC.

Butts told the group about "the transformative potential of a locally based food system," and Wilkerson talked about the market as resource for those dedicated to eating locally grown foods.

At one of the Troy swaps, Alana Chernila, author of "The Homemade Pantry," told the group about her book and blog, www.eatingfromthegroundup.com.

See **SCRATCH,** *page B6*

Upcoming Events

◆ Today — Troy Farmers Market's Community Table. 9 a.m.-1 p.m., River Street, Troy. Also Nov. 17 and every third Saturday of the month

◆ Sunday — Troy Food Swap, with special guests Agricultural Stewardship Association and University at Albany professor Kendra Smith-Howard. 4-6 p.m. at Oakwood Community Center, 313 Tenth St., Troy, Tickets required, $2 suggested donation. Also Nov. 4, and every first and third Sunday of the month.

◆ Nov. 14 — Schenectady Food Swap, First Unitarian Society of Schenectady, 1221 Wendell Ave. 7-9 p.m.

MORE INFO: Class schedule, podcast, blog and full schedule of events at www.fromscratchclub.com

Foss

Continued from page B4

Rises" shooting outside of Denver could be explained by the large number of hippies living in Colorado, and the thin air. You know, as if the actions of a lone gunman could be blamed on a group of people who like to smoke weed, listen to the Grateful Dead and play hacky-sack at high altitude. I mean, why would anyone make a comment like that? It's a question I'm still turning over in my mind, because I genuinely like the person who made it. He offended me, but I saw no reason to unfriend him.

Of course, everybody has their limits, and I'm always interested in learning what they are.

A few years back, my best friend decided that she didn't mind if people expressed different political viewpoints on Facebook, but that she would not tolerate anyone who was anti-gay, and promptly unfriended an old high school classmate who posted frequently on his opposition to same-sex marriage. Since my friend is gay, I found it perfectly understandable that she would draw this particular line in the sand, and I almost joined her, as a gesture of support. (She is my best friend, after all.)

TUNING OUT

But I ultimately decided not to, and remain both fascinated and frustrated by this old high school classmate, and the stuff he posts on Facebook. I don't believe he's a bad guy, and in everything he writes he appears motivated by a desire to make the world a better place. I might wish that he felt differently about certain things, but he has every right to his opinion, and to express himself however he wants. If I don't like what he has to say, I can tune him out, but I actually think there's more value to tuning him in. After all, blocking his comments won't make his ideas disappear.

I've only been one place where it felt like a majority of people shared my outlook on the world: college.

And even there the overlap in ideology was not 100 percent.

My roommate and I agreed on a great many things, but we disagreed on things, too, such as capital punishment, which I was opposed to, and my roommate was for. As we've gotten older, our opinions have evolved, as opinions generally will, and we've both been challenged in our positions. Covering a capital murder trial and having a friend whose brother was murdered prompted some soul-searching for me, while my roommate has been troubled by the number of death row prisoners who have been exonerated. One thing we can both agree on, I think, is that innocent people should not be executed for crimes they didn't commit.

When I talk to my friends and check in on the village, I'm amazed by the differences in opinion, but I'm also amazed by the areas of common ground.

Voting maps reflect that America is a polarized country, with red states and blue states and a small number of swing states, and yet wherever you go you'll find that people want the same things for themselves and their loved ones. That people tend to be, as Anne Frank once wrote, "good at heart."

It can be tough to believe this during a heated election season.

But I believe it's worth trying.

Sara Foss is a Gazette reporter. Opinions expressed in her column are her own and not necessarily the newspaper's. Reach her at sfoss@dailygazette.net. Her blog is at www.dailygazette.com/weblogs/foss.

Scratch

Continued from page B4

People come to the swaps for a variety of reasons. One is just the fun of it. "They're a chance to participate in a barter, a trade economy that we don't have a chance to do that often," said Melissa McKinnon of Niskayuna, director of religious education at the First Unitarian Society of Schenectady, the host site for the Schenectady swaps.

There's a great social aspect, too. "They celebrate food and their craftiness with their friends," said Ashley Gardener, owner of Common Thread Saratoga, the site of the Saratoga swaps. "Others come because they love to make food and share food with others." People enjoy trading something that they've put effort into for something that someone else has put effort into, she's noticed.

Those who aren't sure about swapping can sign up for a "swap curious ticket" (there no fee, but advanced sign-up is required, and all attendees sign waivers to sample and participate in the swaps) just to observe what it's all about. Melissa Berghammer of Broadalbin discovered FSC when she was looking into how to make her own jam. She came as "swap curious" to the last Schenectady swap to check it out.

COOKING CLASSES

Another activity of FSC is cooking classes, which instructors teach at various locations throughout the Capital Region. For example, the Arts Center of the Capital Region in Troy engaged FSC to teach cooking classes there. "There is definitely kind of a slow food movement coming back — DIY and home cooking is very popular now," said education manager Caroline Corrigan. "There is this growing appreciation for whole foods and things that are made from scratch." She also pointed out that in today's economy, people are looking for ways to do things themselves to save money.

FSC also offers a "class in a bag," where an instructor will go to someone's home and give a class for a small group.



PETER R. BARBER/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Crystal Davis of Schenectady takes notes at the Schenectady Food Swap at the First Unitarian Society of Schenectady.

Partnerships are a large way of how FSC achieves its mission. Davis has fostered a network of resources for FSC members. Members have reached out to organizations throughout the Capital Region who have similar philosophies and goals. For example, FSC's bartering and community-building match the mission of Troy's Oakwood Community Center. "The food swaps are very community-building, very positive," said Linda O'Malley, who runs the community center. "These are the new trends and they speak to a different kind of way of doing money and doing home, household kinds of things."

O'Malley welcomes the group monthly to the community center for its food swaps. "It goes along with my mission to do creative outreach with a place that otherwise would be a boarded-up building," she said.

FSC also partners with the Troy Waterfront Farmer's Market. FSC blogs about the market and sets up an information table and demonstrates various cooking techniques and food projects.

"I think there's an increasing desire to rediscover and take charge of what people are eating and drinking and consuming," said Anne Clothier, director of education at the Brookside Museum in Ballston Spa, where FSC teaches classes. "It gives people more power rather than placing it completely in the hands of grocery stores and marketing executives."

BEING IN CONTROL

Preparing food oneself means that you know exactly what has gone into it. "There's a sense of being able to take control of what you're eating," said Hmiel.

FSC members have great plans for the club. They hope one day to have a permanent location with a teaching kitchen and community room as well as a retail location for DIY supplies, books and local foods. Davis also dreams big about creating a food incubator and hub for small start-up food businesses.

Corn

Continued from page B4

hominy, which is a large white kernel corn you find in the grocery store today. The ears were much smaller back then, but corn was one of the staples of Native American life. It was one of the Three Sisters."

The Three Sisters refers to the three principal crops — corn, beans and squash — that the Iroquois planted to help sustain themselves.

PLANTED TOGETHER

"Our ancestors figured out that if you planted corns, beans and squash together, they will grow better and help each other," said Olan. "The Three Sisters were the daughters of Mother Earth, and they represented the corns, beans and squash. It was a lesson in cooperation — it shows how much we can accomplish if we work together — but it also really worked well."

Here's how, according to Renee Shepherd, the owner of Renee's Garden Seeds and a pioneering innovator in introducing international vegetables, flowers and herbs to home gardeners and gourmet restaurants. Her company, based in Felton, Calif., does a huge Internet business and her products are also available at retail stores around the country.

"Corn provides a natural pole for bean vines to climb, and beans fix nitrogen on their roots, improving the overall fertility of the plot by providing nitrogen to the following years corn," Shepherd wrote in her blog, "Renee's Garden."

"Bean vines also help stabilize the corn plants, making them less vulnerable to blowing over in the wind. Shallow-rooted squash vines become a living mulch, shading emerging weeds and preventing soil moisture from evaporating, thereby improving the overall crops chances of survival in dry years. Spiny squash plants also help discourage predators from approaching the corn and beans. The large amount of crop residue from this planting combination can be incorporated back into the soil at the end of the season, to build up the organic matter and improve its structure."



LEE REICH/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

If you've ever grown ornamental or "Indian" corn, you've already grown flint corn, seen here. It was, in fact, the kind of corn grown by Native Americans in the northern United States and Canada.

LEARNING BY DOING

The Native Americans couldn't have explained it as completely as Shepherd, according to Cornelius, but they were convinced that it worked.

"They learned that if you plant them together, they will take care of each other and grow themselves," he said. "They probably knew about the prickers on the vines keeping the varmints out, and how the squash kept weeds from forming and kept the ground moist. They discovered that it was just an awful lot easier planting them together on a side of a hill. They knew it was a symbiotic relationship, and they liked that."

Many Native Americans today continue to grow corn, and more often than not the result is what is often referred to as sweet corn.

"Some of us go to the grocery store, and some of us plant our own sweet corn," said Olan. "It tastes great, and all you do is put it in boiling water. Some of us also plant a more traditional corn, white corn, but that involves a lot more preparation."

At Buhrmaster's Farms in Glenville, Keith Buhrmaster plants about 100 acres of sweet corn and about 10 acres of Indian or ornamental corn.

"It's a novelty item, and we don't seem to sell it like we used to," he said. "It is still pretty popular in the fall, but it's for decoration. The people buying it aren't eating it."

Reach Gazette reporter Bill Buell at 395-3190 or bbuell@dailygazette.com.

Pattersonville FURNITURE STORE
Simmons Beautyrest SALE
Beautyrest LIVING LIFE FULLY CHARGED
recharge
Free Financing Available.
Free delivery & removal
$489 for a Queen Set
OPEN: Daily: 10-5, Thurs. & Fri. 'til 9, Closed Sundays
1664 Main St., Pattersonville, NY
Phone: 518-887-2741
www.pattersonvillefurniture.net

An Apple A Day...
Make Our Orchard Your Orchard!
KNIGHT ORCHARDS A Family Tradition since 1907
Many Varieties of Apples to Choose From!
Fresh Pressed Cider
Honey NY Maple Syrup
Homemade Pies
Tea Breads
325 Goode Street • Burnt Hills, NY
518-399-5174
MON - SAT 8:30AM - 5:30PM
www.knightorchards.com

The Pearce Family's LAKESIDE farm
Country Store Restaurant & Cider Mill
Open 7 Days 7:30 - 6 Serving Breakfast 7:30 - 12 Lunch 11-4:30 Daily
The Apple Barn IS OPEN!
CIDER WITCH Sat. & Sun. 12-4 weather permitting
Fresh Pressed Apple Cider & Apple Cider Doughnuts
WATCH US MAKE CIDER DONUTS AT OUR OUTSIDE CONCESSION TRAILER
• Pumpkins
• Aged Cheeses & Honey
PLUS A LARGE VARIETY OF HOME BAKED PIES!
336 Schauber Rd. • Ballston Lake • 399-8359
www.lakesidefarmscidermill.com

NOW OPEN
Terrace Mountain Orchard
APPLES
Wholesale & Retail
PICK YOUR OWN OR READY PICKED!
16 Varieties of Fine, Healthy Apples
OUR GREAT CIDER DONUTS, COFFEE, CIDER, PIES & OTHER GOOD STUFF
WAGON RIDES AVAILABLE TO AND FROM PICKING!
(WEEKEND ONLY)
Open 7 Days A Week
Hours: 9 am - 5 pm daily
8 am - 5 pm Sat. & Sun.
Rt. 30S, right on Bridge St., Schoharie
(518) 295-8212 Terrace Mt. Rd., Schoharie (518) 295-7755

Colonie Center
Fall RV Special Sales Event
Only at the Colonie Center – Sears Parking Lot
October 19th – October 21st
Friday 10AM – 8PM, Saturday 9AM – 6PM, Sunday 10AM – 5PM
Large Selection of New & Pre-Enjoyed RVs On Site!
FREE Winter Storage With Purchase!
Alpin Haus
Rediscover Family, Fun & Savings
842.5900 | alpinhaus.com