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The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture, And Sustainability In The Gardens Of Ethnic Americans



Synopsis

Patricia Klindienst crossed the country to write this book, inspired by a torn and faded photograph that shed new light on the story of her Italian immigrant family's struggle to adapt to America. She gathered the stories of urban, suburban, and rural gardens created by people rarely presented in books about American gardens: Native Americans, immigrants from across Asia and Europe, and ethnic peoples who were here long before our national boundaries were drawn—including Hispanics of the Southwest, whose ancestors followed the Conquistadors into the Rio Grande Valley, and Gullah gardeners of the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, descendants of African slaves. As we lose our connection to the soil, we no longer understand the relationship between food and a sense of belonging to a place and a people. In *The Earth Knows My Name*, Klindienst offers a lyrical exploration of how the making of gardens and the growing of food help ethnic and immigrant Americans maintain and transmit their cultural heritage while they put roots down in American soil. Through their work on the land, these gardeners revive cultures in danger of being lost. Through the vegetables, fruits, and flowers they produce, they share their culture with their larger communities. And in their reverent use of natural resources they keep alive a relationship to the land all but lost to mainstream American culture. With eloquence and passion, blending oral history and vivid description, Klindienst has created a book that offers a fresh and original way to understand food, gardening, and ethnic culture in America. In this book, each garden becomes an island of hope and offers us a model, on a sustainable scale, of a truly restorative ecology.

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Customer Reviews

Though Klindienst imposes a strong philosophical structure on the narratives in this poetic collection, her political interpretations come second to the beauty and humor in what is essentially a set of portraits of both American gardens and gardeners. Woven into these stories are wide-ranging details of agricultural history: how to make blue corn piki bread, how the injustice of post-emancipation land sales affected one farmer, the fragrance of the sweet-sticky-pumpkin flower brought by refugees from Cambodia. Klindienst's writing shines when recounting her conversations with farmers, but her analysis of "hunger for community" and how a "garden can be a powerful expression of resistance" feels awkward. Luckily, between the prologue and the epilogue, Klindienst provides an unpretentious and touching tour of the increasingly rare corners of the country where land is worked by friendly locals who know the differences between five types of basil and can jaw for hours about plants, soil and the weather: "Oh golly let me see. It would be the bush beans," says one woman when asked about the type of seed she's been saving the longest (70 years, in this case). This book's broad scope touches on the best of nature writing, singing the rhythm of growth in both plants and people. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Klindienst celebrates gardens created by immigrants who resisted the intense pressure to assimilate into mainstream American society, in a lyrical account of her three-year journey to collect the stories of ethnic Americans for whom gardening is tantamount to cultural endurance. Survivors of the Pol Pot regime fled the killing fields of Cambodia for the healing fields of New England, while the Yankee inheritor of land wrested generations ago from Native Americans during the infamous Pequot Massacre of 1637 atones for that atrocity through the simple act of sharing seeds of corn with the tribe's descendants. Klindienst profiles 15 valiant and thoughtful gardeners intent on preserving their native birthright and on restoring and protecting their adopted land, individuals and families evincing a stewardship that not only resists cultural absorption but also sustains an ecological imperative. Carol Haggas Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Fantastic read if you like gardening and culture and food!

A look at how culture and food intersect. This book is a great for explaining how the connection between food & history & culture come together as a whole. I would highly suggest reading this if you love food culture.

I love this book. It is a great resource with exceptional understanding of the topics as discussed . Used as a compliment to other reading materials.

People have been talking about food justice for years. They're also been talking about local food. From a completely different angle, this book happens to unite the two [way back in 2006]. Food justice doesn't just compliment local food in a practical way; food is culture. Everyone in the US came here at some point in history, and brought some form of culture with them [even the Native Americans, although we don't know what their culture was like before they were native]. And these cultures all still give meaning and purpose to the lives of these people today. Often times, the only way left for them to preserve their heritage "after the loss of their land, their language, their clothing, their communities" is by growing and eating the food of their ancestors. And our author Klindienst doesn't sidestep the brutality and violence with which "immigrants" or "foreigners" [many of whom have lived here for generations] are perpetually oppressed. This book is both beautiful and eye-opening, even for someone who's been thinking a lot about food, cultivation, culture, and privilege for some time now.

Last summer I received this book as a surprise gift from my son's partner. Its author is a like an aunt to her, and she thought I might enjoy it. I was very touched by this generous gesture and certainly hoped to like it; its vivid cover looked inviting and the topic intriguing, but my expectations were modest at best. Dutifully I delved into it - lo and behold, I didn't just like it. I loved it. The writing is lyrical, the stories are powerful. Its narratives, chronicling the experience of people bringing forth food from the earth, put this book squarely on the shelf with Kingsolver's *Animal Vegetable Miracle* and Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma*. English lacks a word for people who grow their own food while working a day job: hence the book's dissertation-length title, *The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture, and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans*. "Gardener" connotes flowers more than edibles; "farmer" and "grower" suggest fulltime professionals, and "subsistence farmer" conjures up hardscrabble sharecropping. Our closest term is kitchen or cottage gardeners. The author highlights eight gardens, each created and nurtured by people whose pleasure in growing things and deep reverence for the earth are powerfully and poetically expressed - especially

captivating since few of them would be comfortable writing their observations and experiences. The reader feels privileged to sit in on the dialogue between author and subject - lush descriptions jump off each page, allowing us to see, smell, taste, and feel the bounty of these gardens. Each day's sequence of harvesting, preparing, preserving, and eating, along with endless garden tasks, including saving the best seeds for the next year's planting, come to life. Klindienst skillfully recreates the narratives of these gardeners speaking their truths and sharing their intimate knowledge of producing sustenance; their garden labors sustain them spiritually as well as physically. Most of them are immigrants who bridge their old homes and their new by connecting with the earth. Meet the Khmer growers of Western Massachusetts, aging immigrant survivors of genocide. Over time they have created a flourishing New England community garden featuring South Asian fruits and vegetables. In their garden these two sisters are at home, at peace. From early spring to late fall they are busy every minute nurturing both their plants and the younger family and community members who help out; their organic produce is in great demand by local fans and restaurants. When the harvest season ends, the garden's proceeds fund wat restorations and schools in their home village in Cambodia as well as new local Massachusetts Buddhist communities. When winter settles in their aches, traumas, and flashbacks reappear. Cooped up indoors all winter, they long for their garden, a surrogate for their past lives, only feeling hopeful again when spring revives their spirits. Visit with Klindienst in Ruhan Kainth's Punjabi garden in Fullerton, California. Had she stayed in her comfortable home in India, Ruhan would have enjoyed the many privileges of high economic status, but she would not have been free to garden - in her home culture, such work is considered beneath her. She learned about the wonder of growing things by collecting tenant farmers' rent for her physician father who worked abroad. In California she can, and does, grow everything she wants. Her South Asian American friends find it all very puzzling. Why would she want to get dirty? A visit to her recreated semi-tropical garden answers that question - she has her own private paradise, a quarter acre with over 50 fruits, vegetables, and herbs, including the centerpiece, a neem tree, one of only a few in North America. I gave a copy of this book to my South Asian friend Meenal, a newbie gardener, and recommended this particular chapter. When her parents recently went back for a visit to their native India, they asked Meenal what she might like them to bring back. Her answer: "Seeds!" So Ruhan already has already raised up a disciple. Perhaps one day Ruhan and Meenal will even trade their best seeds along with their stories, who knows? The last of its eight chapters chronicles the wondrous story of Whit Davis, an 11th generation Connecticut farmer who has recently presented revered Indian white flint corn to the descendants of the Native Americans displaced by his colonial ancestors. Along with the seed corn,

he sends the following instructions via the author, who is doing the actual presentation: "Tell them they should plant two, three fields of it and to keep them separated. After three, four years, they should take the best seed from all three and mix them together and start again. That way they keep the corn strong. Tell them that I wish them well. Tell them that I wish them good luck in all their endeavors." I gave a copy of this book to my nephew Neil, a PhD in eco-biology, now a plant biologist developing drought resistant corn, and directed him to Whit's story. Neil was astounded to read Whit's instructions, because they describe precisely the methodology he and his team utilize in their experimental fields. We live in a time of keen interest in food politics and increasing ecological concern. One of the book's strengths is its subtlety in these matters. The stories tell themselves, but they also enhance the reader's awareness of the need to support local farmers, preserve open space, and protect seed banks from corporate, monopolistic control. This book is suffused with deep and ancient wisdom. It is more than just an oral history book; it is a sacred text, helping us to relearn deep reverence and spiritual connection. Considering how drawn in I was by Klindienst's work, it came as no surprise to me when I learned that she has won a 2007 American Book Award for *The Earth Knows My Name*. This prize highlights writing which expresses America's multicultural heritage. Just one suggestion: read the prologue after reading the main body of the book, at which point you will have fallen in love with all her subjects, and realize what an artful volume Patricia Klindienst has created. By then, reading her own story will make more sense. Another reading tip: there is a coherent order to the chapters, but each stands on its own, so no need to read them in sequence. Warning: this book is powerful. Don't be surprised if, come spring, you find yourself planting a cottage garden....

In the early 1970's Studs Terkel traveled across the country interviewing people about their work, and eventually compiled the interviews into the book *Working*. In the early 2000's, Patricia Klindienst took a similar approach, traveling around the USA to interview ethnic gardeners, immigrants who maintain their cultural identity through their connection to the earth. While *The Earth Knows My Name* will never be a musical, it is a marvellous testament to the importance of earth and water, seed and plant, and in sustaining not just our ethnic roots, but also our whole selves. Her words bring to life the feeling of warm sun on your back while you plant corn, or crisp autumn mornings harvesting beans. She lets you smell the scent of flowers, but also taste the flavor of language, in her profiles of 15 gardeners. This book is well written, it is poignant, and it is gently honest, with the author's love of gardening, and sincere respect for her subjects masking the inevitable political undercurrents. My only complaint is that there should have been more pictures - I craved a

coffee-table presentation, with Klindienst's words matched to lush photographs. But maybe the mind's eye is the better viewing choice. Buy the book, and decide for yourself. Better yet, buy the book, and plant a garden.

An absolutely fantastic read. The gardeners' stories put heart and soul into American history. The author beautifully ties gardening to the people of the world and the history that brought them to the United States. Never would I have guessed it possible to learn so much international history through a book about gardening. Highly recommended.

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