

The Leaves of Twin Oaks

NEWS OF THE OAKS

by Valerie

With autumn comes harvest season, and there is a lot of Farm and Food news to report. Our intrepid Garden Crew harvested over 4,200 pounds of **potatoes** this fall, a higher-than-average yield. In October, we had 7 cows pregnant at once—a rare occurrence—and so we can expect a bounty of milk in the coming months. In addition to drinking the milk, we use it make a variety of **dairy products** including Romano, Stilton, cream cheese, yogurt, butter and for special occasions, ice cream! (more about our Dairy Program in this newsletter) There are several fruit **orchards** throughout the community and this year we were lucky enough to be eating hardy kiwis (the most northerly-growing variety) into November. We also picked a single pomegranate off of the tree outside Morningstar, and look forward to more as the tree matures in coming years.

Hardy kiwis grown at Twin Oaks



The community is still, 15 months later, experiencing the effects of last summer's earthquake. When the water flow of our well began losing volume, apparently from underground shifts due to the quake, we researched the problem and found a surprising solution. Many people are familiar with the practice of **fracking**, notably in the news these days related to natural gas extraction. But it's also used to restore and improve water flow in potable (drinkable) water wells, using less pressure and no chemicals. Now, three months post-fracking, the well is performing normally and we're able to meet all of our own domestic and industrial water needs once again

Twin Oakers were active in a number of events these last few months. We held our annual **Communities Conference**, a weekend event for people interested in ecovillages, cohousing, communes, and all forms of cooperative living—we had a record 185 people in attendance! Sadly, we had to cancel our herstoric **Women's Gathering** this year.

A number of members took part in the **Heritage Harvest Festival** at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, a huge sustainable food event co-organized by **Ira**, a long-time Twin Oaks member. And lastly, a number of members were active in local and presidential election campaigning—the community has a policy that members cannot engage in political activism in the name of Twin Oaks, but members can be active as an individual.

On the internal political front, we've had a few happenings in both the money and labour scene. We raised the amount of our **personal spending money** to \$90 per month—an all-time high in our 45-year history! The amount is tied to our quarterly income, and when our collectively-owned businesses earn more, the bulk of that money goes to our communal expenses, but individuals also receive an increase.

We've also agreed to experiment with altering our communal labour system. In 2013 and 2014, we will be trying out using **“Flex Hours”**. In Twin Oaks jargon, instead of people claiming “over-quota” labour credits for any work done over and above our 42-hour-per-week work quota, all work will be done “in-quota” and each member will have 60 “Flex Hours” that can used to do extra work in the area of their choosing.

On-the-farm activities of the last few months have included an **all women's ultimate frisbee** game, which was well-attended including some new recruits. Thanksgiving brought the Twin Oaks **“Turkey Bowl”**, a touch-football game with a half-time show featuring our ad hoc Marching Band playing the theme from “Rocky”. We also had a musical extravaganza **“Oakstock”**, a one-day concert show-casing many members' musical talents. We hosted an evening of “The Music of Winter”, all songs with a winter theme. And lastly, this winter Tuesdays mean dueling D&D, with two different **Dungeons and Dragons** games happening the same night. ✨

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Beginnings and Endings

Due to our size and demographics, Twin Oaks has a certain amount of turnover, with people arriving and leaving with some regularity. This is a significant part of life here—new people bring fresh energy into the group, but it can be difficult to say goodbye. Here Ali and Janel share their experiences from both ends of the spectrum.

Arriving at Twin Oaks: Ali's One Month Perspective

by Ali (member Nov. 2012 — ??)

As a new member at Twin Oaks, a question I get a lot is, “What work are you going to be doing?” and by this they mean “Where are you going to focus?” It seems that most people here do several things, but have a few areas where they focus and get most of their labor credits from. It's fairly typical for new members to have lots of different jobs and then find a few things they like as they age in membership. This may happen to me, but at least for right now I'm loving the variety. I found myself entirely bored in my last job in “the mainstream,” doing the same thing all day every day and the work variety is one of the main things that drew me to Twin Oaks. Since arriving, I have done at least 15 different jobs including cooking, cleaning, childcare, making pillows, tofu & hammocks, splitting wood, hanging drywall, gardening, caring for the chickens and milking the cows. Some are jobs I actively enjoy and some I feel are a contribution I make to the community, but doing so many things keeps me interested and excited.

The other question I get a lot is “How are you adjusting?” and this I take to mean “Do you have any friends yet?” and “Are you okay with your room/the bathroom/the kitchen/



living in community?” I have been in group living situations before, so sharing space and being around other people all the time feel normal to me. As for my room in Ta Chai, it's far nicer than many places I've lived (which include an old horse stall and a broken down bus). In terms of the social scene, I've been blown away by the amount of fun things to do here and cool people to do them with. When I moved to Pittsburgh last year it took me weeks to meet my neighbors and a month before I was invited over for dinner. At Twin Oaks I just check the Today Board, wander around looking for people or express an interest in a plan and I end up with more things to do than I have time for. As I was warned about, the challenge here seems to be saying “no” (both to work and play) and getting enough sleep! From dance parties to bonfires to board games I don't have nearly as much time for reading as I expected.

The question I get from friends and family “on the outside” (and one I regularly ask myself) is “Are you happy at Twin Oaks?” When I have days where my face hurts from smiling so much, I think I can safely answer that with a yes.

Dining in Community

The Community That Dines Together, Aligns Together

by Valerie

Ah yes, the community meal table. Communal dining can be a glorious bonding experience, as members recreate the feeling of an earlier era when the tribe gathered at the end of the day to share the fruits of their bounty. On the other hand, it can also bring out certain aspects of the cook's personality, as sure as Myers-Briggs.

Here is a sampling of the “Cook du Jour”.

“LE CHEF” — Before joining community, this member ran their own French restaurant. They know that presentation

makes the meal, and people ooh and aah over their concoctions. Their cooking is generally well-appreciated, with the exception of people who like their green beans other than dripping with butter.

“THE ETHNIC SPECIALIST” — Thai, Indian, Chinese, Ethiopian—it's a geographical whirlwind as each week we're whisked off to another exotic food locale. The underlying theme: more spice is twice as nice. Bland is banned, so it's peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich night for those with sensitive palates.

Beginnings and Endings

Leaving Twin Oaks: Janel's Retrospective

by Janel (member Sep. 2010 — Oct. 2012)

Moving to Twin Oaks was a pure leap of faith. After working at sea as a cruise ship singer, all I wanted to do was live on a farm, taking in the pleasure of land and the home-grown food that came with it. I didn't really understand this yearning (and my parents certainly didn't). But the heart understands things long before the head does.

When I became a member at 23, I was sure of only two things: that I wanted A) to have an adventurous life and B) to challenge the status quo. Up to that point, I had the adventurous part down. Living in an alternative society certainly seemed to satisfy the second life requirement. Little did I know that Twin Oaks would challenge me. No one expects that they're going to move to a commune and learn more in two years than in eighteen years of school. Twin Oaks is where I learned to discipline myself and be my own boss. It's where I learned that I have the entrepreneurial energy to take a floundering project and turn it into something new. (Few are the places you can be a manager at 24.)

Twin Oaks is where I figured out why I moved there in the first place—that I have a deep passion for sustainably produced food. I guess it took one ultra-processed cruise ship meal too many to set me on a journey to figure that out. After working with the community poultry program and gaining networking skills through the Communities Con-

ference and Acorn's Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, I realized that my goal is to propagate the local food movement currently sweeping the nation. After two years at Twin Oaks, I decided this goal would be best fulfilled in California, the agricultural heartland of the U.S. and location of my childhood home.



I know it can be hard on Twin Oaks when members come and go. But as much as it is a home for 100, Twin Oaks is an incubator—of new ideas, of skills, of people who think outside the box. Twin Oaks is where my understanding of my ideals, talents and dreams crystallized. Twin Oaks is where I truly grew up. If there's one way that the community challenges the status quo, it's through people whose worldviews have been rocked; people who take what they've learned at Twin Oaks into the wider world and do their part to transform it. My hope is to do exactly that.

A few years before he died, Steve Jobs said it was only in looking back on his life that he could “connect the dots” and understand the implications and effects of every action he took. I already feel this way about my time at Twin Oaks—it illuminated the direction I want my life to take. And for now, that direction is west. But a piece of my heart will always lie in Virginia. ❁

(Dining in Community—cont'd)

“FOOD AS ART” — This member doesn't see any reason why their creative, whimsical side needs to be left at the kitchen door. Tofu sculpted to resemble a recent guest or a Thanksgiving turkey, a rainbow salad including beets, carrots, peppers, kale, blueberries and grapes, or a cake in the shape of a body part—their creativity knows no bounds on the serving table. (Results may vary, depending on actual cooking skill)

“AGIT-PROP CUISINE” — When politics and food collide (think Chairman Mao with a measuring cup). All-vegan-

all-the-time, no refined anything, no profit-mongering corporate ingredients to be found in any dish. The heart and mind can enjoy this meal, but the stomach may stage its own protest....

“LOCAVORACIOUS” — A lighter-hearted version of the above, this cook sources their food from within 100 miles, or better yet, 100 yards of the communal kitchen. No flora or fauna are exempt, and dinner may include what you previously thought were weeds growing beside the porch or the groundhog that was last seen invading the garden.

Cows in Community

Our Dairy Program

by Keegan

Being able to work in the dairy was one of the primary motivations for my move to Twin Oaks. As a city kid woefully unskilled in practical work, the possibility of shifting from an uneasy off-and-on consumer of meat products to raising, milking, slaughtering, and butchering my own cows was intoxicating. My enthusiasm was well-timed, and within months of joining, I was made the dairy manager.

For me, the greatest part of working in the dairy, besides the pleasure of working with such characterful creatures, has been the experience of eating animals that I have personally cared for; of facing the ethical problem of eating an animal without hypocrisy. This is not to say that I believe eating local meat with the appropriate labels cleanly resolves the problem of killing, but that knowing the animals I am to eat is the bare minimum required for me to do so with dignity.

Our dairy program is unique even compared with other small organic operations. We do not sell our products, and so our considerations are primarily quality-of-life. For instance, it's illegal in Virginia to sell raw, unpasteurized milk, and yet we consume it here in large quantities every day. The food we make with it would be ludicrously expensive in the mainstream: imagine seeing icing in a store made with raw milk from grass-fed cows raised in a local, worker-owned dairy. Such luxurious and ethical goods are standard fare here.

Many of our cows are also of a rare breed known as Dutch Belted. Though unpopular with commercial dairies (probably because milk production is lower than with

commercial breeds), they are extremely well-suited to our purposes: they survive very well on grass (other breeds require lots of supplementary grain), are long-lived, get big enough to be useful for beef, and have a higher conception rate and fewer birth complications than other breeds. For us, this means less money on grain (our biggest dairy expense), less money on vets, and less stress.

Our milking shifts are pretty big tasks: a single individual is responsible for herding, milking, caring for calves, checking for cows in heat, and cleaning the barn. There's a lot that can go wrong. But this level of responsibility means that the burden of running a dairy is shared. We all get vacations. We all get to sleep in if we choose. And despite being the manager, there are days every week when I'm not in the barn at all. It's a good and balanced life. ❁



Pipestone (aka Mr. Pipes)

Each year calves are named after a theme — this year it's national parks

(Dining in Community—cont'd)

"THE MESS HALL" — Prior military, cafeteria or summer camp experience informs this cook's style. Mass-produced and designed to appeal to the masses, these meals are heavy on the mac-and-cheese, gravy-laden entrees, and all things carbohydrate.



Regardless of style, as we sit down to a meal together in accordance with our own community traditions--be that thanking the cook, saying a prayer, or simply digging in--we can appreciate that the simple act of sharing food is an important part of the "community glue" that holds us all together. *Bon Appetit!*

(Valerie has eaten more than 14,000 communal meals over the course of her 20-year membership.)

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