Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
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Producer/Host: Jon Steinman
Transcript: Sarah Sherman

Jon Steinman: Welcome to Deconstructing Dinner, a syndicated weekly one hour radio program and podcast currently heard on 25 stations across Canada and coming to you from the studios of Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman, and I'll be with you for the next hour.

I can say first off how excited I am for tonight's show, because today marks the first of a new series here on the program that will be zeroing in on a topic that hasn't nearly received as much attention as it deserves here on the program. The series is titled, *Heritage Food: Preserving Diversity*.

One of the most underreported threats to our local, national and global food systems, has been the relatively rapid loss of agricultural diversity. The food we eat today, is most often the product of plant varieties that have become so homogenous, that in almost every grocery store across the country, you can find the exact same variety of tomato, the very same variety of wheat that went into your loaf of bread, the very same breed of cow that provided you with dairy or the very same breed of hen that laid your egg. We'll speak more on the dangers such a homogenous system of agriculture has on the future viability of our food systems, but as will be more of a focus on today's broadcast, we will look at two Canadians who are helping preserve some pieces of Canada's food heritage, a heritage that has been lost to the powerful influence of multinational seed corporations who have taken over Canada's food system.

Joining the program today will be Sharon Rempel, an agronomist based in Victoria, British Columbia who is one of the country's leading advocates pushing for the preservation and cultivation of Canada's heritage varieties of wheat. We'll also travel to my old neighbourhood in the Niagara Region of Ontario, where Deconstructing Dinner correspondent Marinko Jareb visited with Linda Crago of Tree and Twig Heirloom Vegetable Farm. And also on the show today will be the radio debut of a new song by Salt Spring Island musician Phil Vernon, who, if you're a veteran listener of Deconstructing Dinner, you may recall created such tunes as The Ballad of Percy Schmeiser, GE-Free, and Something's In the Garden.

increase music and fade out

Just a few quick mentions before we embark on the first of this new Heritage Food series here on Deconstructing Dinner. Given the not-for-profit nature of this program, I do from time to time have to spend a few moments asking devoted listeners, like yourselves, for your financial support to help keep Deconstructing Dinner on the air. As a radio program that attempts to remain critical of every aspect of our food systems, it becomes quite difficult to get companies like Kraft Foods, McDonalds, Whole Foods or Nestle (for obvious reasons) to advertise on the program, and with little support in Canada's independent media world coming from government or private institutions, listener contributions are the most important source of funding for the program.

And so we have for quite some time maintained a page on our website where listeners are able to donate to the program, but we have just this week launched another feature that will make supporting Deconstructing Dinner as easy and effective as possible. Located on the main page of our website is a new subscription feature, and we're hoping those of you who tune in to Deconstructing Dinner on an ongoing or periodic basis will commit to a $5 per month subscription that will be charged automatically to any major credit card. And you could imagine the $5 as being the same amount of money that one would spend on a newspaper or cable television subscription, or an internet subscription as well. The process of signing up is quick, secure and will greatly contribute to our ability to bring you this important information about where your food is coming from and the many inspiring stories of people and communities reclaiming control of their food. The subscription feature plus other information on how to support the program is again, on the main page of our website at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner

soundbite

JS: Moving along to today's broadcast which marks the first of what will be an ongoing and important series titled Heritage Food: Preserving Diversity. It's first important to lay out, what Heritage Food is, and why it is so important. One word that is often used to describe a heritage variety of food is the word heirloom. And throughout the series, you will likely here both heritage and heirloom used interchangeably.

But it can be stated right up front, that in the past 100 years, the diversity in the varieties of foods available to Canadians has dwindled significantly. Virtually all of the fruits, vegetables, grains, livestock and pretty much every ingredient found on grocery store shelves, is of a variety that has purely been bred for profit. At no time has the importance of maintaining diversity and flavour ever been a concern for the powerful industrial food system that has taken hold of the North American diet. Now the risks associated with the loss of such diversity will be the focus for upcoming broadcasts on this Heritage Foods series, but here are just a few thoughts to get your mind wrapped around what makes the work of my two guests on today's program so important.

In the case of livestock, 90% of dairy in Canada, again that's 90%, now comes from one breed. Most turkey's in Canada, have been bred to produce so much meat, that most are prone to heart attacks because of how much extra weight they now carry around. The most common hen laying eggs for Canadians, has been bred in such a way that they have

almost completely lost their mothering instincts, quite the concern when the industrial egg industry supplies 98% of Canada's eggs and is one that is not environmentally sustainable.

And so with such concern raised around this loss of diversity and loss of flavour, the international Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity has launched what is called The Ark of Taste, a project that aims to rediscover, catalog, describe and publicize forgotten flavours. And this too will be the focus of an upcoming broadcast. But six varieties have made their way into Canada's Ark of Taste, one of which will be the main focus on today's broadcast. And here's the list. The first is the Canadienne Cow, with only 1,000 of them left in the country. The second, Herring Spawn on Kelp, a staple food of British Columbia's First Nations. The Montreal Melon, once known in Canada as the Queen of Melons, but it was too large of a variety to fit into our homogenous industrial food system. The Nova Scotia Gravenstein Apple. The Great Plains Bison is in the Ark of Taste as well. And the last one currently residing in the ark, is Red Fife Wheat, known as the grandfather or grandmother of most of the varieties of wheat found across the country today, and we'll learn more about Red Fife in just a moment.

But I did also come across a great list of heritage varieties of foods in the April edition of Harrowsmith CountryLife magazine, and the magazine has sent us the article to include on our website, and I encourage you to take a read of it. So often when Canadians walk into a grocery store, you may have the choice of one kind of beet, one kind of leek, one kind of garlic, maybe 3 kinds of tomatoes. But take a listen to some of these names that come out of the Harrowsmith article that help describe what our tastebuds are missing out on. In the case of beets, some heritage varieties consist of Detroit's Dark Red, Bull's Blood or Cylindra. In the case of leeks, varieties such as Bleu de Solaise, St. Victors, and Large Musselburg now evade grocery store shelves. Varieties of Garlic such as Red Russian, Spanish Roja, and Susan Delafield have been most often replaced by horrible tasting varieties coming from China. In the case of cattle raised for beef, you can be certain that your grocery store does not carry Canadian Lineback, Highland or Galloway. You can be quite certain that they don't carry tomatoes with the names Amish Paste, Black Plum, Purple Russian or Opalka. And the list of forgotten varieties goes on.

But as will be the focus for today's broadcast, Red Fife Wheat is making a comeback here in Canada, a variety that was the primary grain feeding Canadians between the 1860s and early 1900s. First grown in the Otanabee region of central Ontario, farmers David and Jane Fife planted Red Fife using seed from Scotland that is said to have descended from a Ukranian variety.

But now, one of the most active promoters of reintroducing Red Fife Wheat into Canada is Victoria's Sharon Rempel, an agronomist with expertise in organic production, seed conservation, and on-farm wheat breeding of heritage crops. In 1989, Sharon created the well known Seedy Saturday seed exchanges that now take place across the country. She is the Director of the Heritage Wheat Project, and the Designer of Grassroot Solutions. Sharon most recently hosted Canada's first ever Bread and Wheat Festival that took place in October in Victoria, and Deconstructing Dinner's Andrea Langlois payed a visit to the

festival where she recorded Sharon speaking to an audience there. I did also spend some time speaking over the phone with Sharon Rempel following the festival.

And so first, here's Sharon Rempel, introducing the October 2007 Bread and Wheat Festival held in Victoria, British Columbia.

Sharon Rempel: Welcome to Canada's first bread and wheat festival. It was an idea I had three months ago to draw attention to the fact that we've taken much for granted, including our local wheat supply. By Canadian law wheat is a commodity. Taste has never been a criteria of any importance for selling wheat and farmer variety identification has been removed, so you just buy number one Canada grade wheat, or you buy number two durum. And that's all the identification you get on it. So any identification of the farmer, or the variety you are eating is missing. I believe that much of the reason we have so many food intolerances is that we've got that commoditization of our system. Katarina who has just been here started to eat Red Fife flour and bread a few months ago and she could start to eat bread again. This is not an unusual story for me to hear.

JS: We will be learning more about how Sharon has been involved in the reintroduction of Red Fife Wheat in Canada, but first, here's a clip of Sharon Rempel speaking about the politics behind reintroducing an unapproved wheat variety in Canada. Essentially, growing Red Fife Wheat is illegal, and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has been sending threatening letters to those who are growing it.

SR: By Canadian law, Red Fife Wheat and any variety of wheat that is unregistered is illegal to sell. So farmers in the prairies who have got Red Fife and other varieties for sale that are not registered cannot legally advertise in the Western Producer or any paper they've got these seeds. Jim Ternier is the president of Seeds of Diversity Canada has been sent a threatening letter by the CFIA, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, in the last month saying he's got to stop selling Red Fife. And he sells it in little 40 gram packets, but he's got to stop immediately or they're going to take him to court. So the Variety of Registration is a government approved body. I'm a plant breeder, by Canadian law I'm not a plant breeder because I refuse to produce hybrids. I grow landrace varieties of wheat. Landraces are old varieties of wheat that grow very well without a lot of chemicals and fertilizers. They are very diverse genetically and yet quite uniform. Red Fife looks very similar every field I look at, but genetically when you've done the protein banding that shows how the variety starts to change. It starts to change immediately as it goes into the interaction of the soil and the environment, the bioregion. So that's incredibly handy because all crops have landraces in them. They are called folk varieties or farmer varieties and generally they're in the so called underdeveloped areas of the world where people can't afford a lot of chemicals.

JS: We will learn more in just a moment on why Red Fife is such an important variety with respect to its ability to adapt quickly to the bioregion it's growing in, but it did spark my interest to learn more about the varieties of wheat that are approved in Canada. I took a trip over to the CFIA's website to learn more about the Plant Breeders Rights Office

that administers the Plant Breeders Rights Act and Regulations, and these regulations provide legal protection to plant breeders for new plant varieties.

Within the list of approved wheats are only 111 varieties, all of which are hybrid varieties with names such as 2510, 5701PR, Commander, Gunner, Freedom, Patriot, PRCW9201, and the best of all, Invader. Of the 111 varieties listed, the rights to 33% of them are controlled by non-Canadian companies or institutions, 47% are controlled by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, and the remaining 20% are owned by Canadian companies or institutions.

But nowhere in the list is Red Fife Wheat, the predecessor to many of the varieties that are approved, but as Sharon puts it, Red Fife is Canada's wheat, and it's part of our cultural heritage and is a symbol of reclaiming part of the food supply and placing it into the hands of people.

SR: Red Fife is really a metaphor. It's not just a variety. People are now buying that variety coast to coast because they can buy a variety. It gives them a warm. Does it give you a warm fuzzy feeling? (audience responds unanimously, Yes!) Great! You can't put a market value on that.

Bigger companies now are looking at Red Fife products because there's a feeling that's never been marketed, or that has been marketed but never exploited economically. How will we put a price on the warm fuzzy feeling of Red Fife?

So that wheat belongs to Canada. It's something that is actually so grassroots, and wheat is a member of the grass family, is that it belongs to you and I. It's part of our cultural heritage, but we don't own it. It came out of the Ukraine. That's why those ladies are baking bread with Ukranian roots because Red Fife has Ukranian roots, and this year we're celebrating Red Fife's Ukranian roots.

So are you going to say I can't grow my cultural heritage? It's been brushed under the carpet. But now there's enough tonnage of Red Fife that the grass is pushing the carpet up, and you're living in some very exciting times that are going to happen. And I always thought that if I had to go to jail I would go because I would stand up and say 'No, this variety belongs to the people of Canada and that seed should be in the hands of the people.'

The hand that holds the seed controls the food supply. And may that always be people. And that's why it's my hand in that brochure holding those seeds that's in every book that you have here. That's it. That's all your hands, and that's what Red Fife is a metaphor about. It's a symbolism of people reclaiming food supply.

JS: And that was Sharon Rempel speaking at the October Bread and Wheat Festival held in Victoria. Deconstructing Dinner's Andrea Langlois recorded her presentation and the entire 48 minute recording will be available on the Deconstructing Dinner website.

Shortly after the festival I did catch up with Sharon over the phone to learn more about why Red Fife Wheat is so important to Canada's heritage, to our health, to the biodiversity of our agricultural systems, to flavour and to the creation of more sustainable local food systems. I first wanted to learn more about what the current dominant system of growing wheat looks like.

SR: In Canada we were colonized in the 1800s to open up the prairies to grow wheat. Of course the railway came in so that the grain could be transported on either coast so it could be shipped overseas. So the systems that came into place, the Canadian Grain Act, the Canadian Wheat Board, the Crow Rate. All of these were designed for export and the export market is what Canada has prized itself on for high quality grain. So a system of grading grain that has taken away the farmer and variety identification, a marketing board, the Canadian Wheat Board, the Canadian Grain Act, have all been set up to regulate so we have high quality export. And that's really what the focus has been for decades. So when varieties of wheat have been developed by plant breeders and put into the variety of registration system, which is regulated by the Government, Agriculture Canada, only their approved varieties, these registered varieties have been legally allowed to be sold as varieties in Canada. And that focus was to keep the export market lucrative. Well now in the last couple of decades, and certainly in the last few years, we're realizing that the eat local, buy local message, which we had as part of our grass roots philosophy of the 1980s has come back into vogue, because of oil prices and other environmental issues. People want to know who grow their food, they want to know the farmer, they want to know the variety because we're now realizing some of the heritage varieties have higher nutrient qualities that are important to us for our own nutrition. The export driven marketing system of Canada doesn't facilitate us selling variety and farmer identified wheat. So the system doesn't serve local food needs anymore. We need a parallel system in Canada that will allow us to meet our local food needs and that's retaining farmer and identity verification.

So the system of commodification of foods suits the economists but it doesn't suit agritourism people, it doesn't suit local farmer's markets, it doesn't suit the local organic food people. And the organic food industry is one of the most rapid growing ones in Canada. So it's a very interesting time to be alive to see the merging of our old grassroots philosophy of farmer and variety identification coming in economically.

JS: And this is Deconstructing Dinner and part I of a new series here on the program titled Heritage Food: Preserving Diversity. On today's part I we zero in on what is perhaps the most important heritage variety of wheat in Canada, one that thanks to people like Sharon Rempel is making a steady comeback into the bakeries and kitchens of Canadians. Later on the broadcast we will visit with a heritage vegetable farm located in the Niagara region of Ontario. I also encourage you to stay tuned to the radio debut of musician Phil Vernon's new song titled Red Fife Wheat. Phil recorded the song just this week for today's broadcast.

On some recent broadcasts of Deconstructing Dinner, it has been emphasized how in some parts of Canada, accessing local grain is extremely difficult for those wishing to

incorporate a more local diet into their daily lives. It's this very interest that has begun to encourage farmers across the country to begin growing grain for local markets, and with an even greater interest in foods grown organically, Sharon Rempel suggests that Red Fife wheat is ideal, because it grew well in Canada long before the introduction of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

And so, how did Sharon stumble upon the idea of resurrecting a heritage wheat variety? Take a listen.

SR: In 1987 I was the chief interpreter at a provincial historic site called the Grist Mill at Keremeos which is in a little town south of Penticton along the Snoqualmie Valley in British Columbia and we had an 1880s water powered Grist Mill and as an interpreter I wanted to make a meaningful link with my visitor and the object being the mill, and I thought well the mill didn't just sit there, it had to grind grain. Let's find a variety of wheat that would have been growing in that time period. And I sent a letter off to the University of Saskatchewan and said 'What varieties were growing at that time?' I knew very little about wheat. And they forwarded my letter to a plant breeder named Lee Crowl and Lee Crowl was retiring and he sent me a pound. And little did I realize what a gold mining gift he had sent me, a pound of Red Fife, Ladoga, Bishop, Preston and Stanley, Hard Red Calcutta, Marquis and Thatcher. And farmers tingled when they'd see these varieties growing in the field because these were the old grandparent wheats that their families would have talked about. And here they saw them growing and alive at the Grist Mill so we had a living museum of wheat.

And visitors began to get most excited when they'd stand in front of Red Fife. And I thought, this is interesting, historically we knew it was a great milling and baking wheat, but what had happened to it from 1900, when it was displaced by its son Marquis, to the time I got this pound of wheat in 1987. What had Red Fife done? Well it had been in University collections and plant breeder collections, they were using it in their fields to develop new hybrids and new varieties. But people didn't see the value in growing these old landraces and folk varieties for their own merit. And many don't now. I'm an odd fish in the sea of plant breeders because I believe these old varieties can once again feed us.

So we've got, I don't know what it did for 87 years, I guess it was just the tools for modern varieties and then as we begin to bulk up these old varieties, meaning increase your seed content, we didn't have enough to try it in bread or in baking. We just had a limited quantity of seed, but as people began to bring their relatives up to the wheat fields and they'd stand there for an hour in the heat talking about the wondrous stories of Red Fife. I said to my colleague working at the Grist Mill with me, 'What if we could re-commercialize this variety? What if we could once again take these few seeds and make it economically viable again?' Because if it was so great for Canada for 40 years, what's its possibilities now for Organic farmers? (I was the president of Alberta's Organic Farming Group at that time.) Who knows? When you put intent out and a few seeds. Now we had over 500 tons harvested of Red Fife from that one pound of Red Fife.

JS: As is often mentioned here on Deconstructing Dinner when speaking of seed varieties available to Canadians, the vast majority of seeds have been bred in such a way as to ensure the breeder can maintain control over the seed. Now in most cases, these breeders are large multinational seed companies, universities or government. And of course such control over the foundational supply of our food system and essentially of human life is a real ethical and philosophical debate. But what these companies and institutions are all essentially capitalizing on, are varieties that have been created by farmers and have cultural significance. Red Fife Wheat, the focus for today's broadcast, is in fact the foundational variety for most of the varieties now being grown in Canada. And Sharon Rempel explains.

SR: We have a chart that shows that all of the main Canadian varieties and many of the US and global varieties go back to the old variety called Red Fife and Red Fife came to Canada in the 1840s and fed Canada from 1860 to 1900. But it was a very strong, adaptable landrace meaning it had a uniform look, which is by Canadian law how they grade a variety, it's only by the visual characteristics, not by the genetics. So Red Fife was a very fine variety and it fed Canada until 1900. And then plant breeders would take Red Fife and cross it with other varieties, for example, Hard Red Calcutta and Red Fife were crossed to produce Marquis in the late 1890s which is an earlier maturing variety when the Peace region was being opened up as a grain growing area. So these old traits that are in Red Fife are desired and even now modern plant breeders still go back to these old heritage varieties for traits of vigour, durability, pest resistance.

JS: And so if Red Fife Wheat was such a great and resilient variety, why has it disappeared? Well as Sharon Rempel points out, government and university labs need a means to help finance their research, and control of seed satisfies this need.

SR: So the modern varieties there's also an economic spin if you're a plant breeder in a university and government is starting to cut your funding you've got to find ways to generate income to keep your lab open so you develop new and improved varieties and put a patent on them, they become a hybrid and then people are, if you get your regulations in place, forced to come back to you for fresh seed every few years, so it keeps your system flowing economically. But it doesn't support conservation of agricultural biodiversity.

JS: As was mentioned earlier on the broadcast, much has been sacrificed in order to homogenize our food supply to satisfy profit and exports. One of the most significant sacrifices has been flavour, and when it comes to wheat, how often have we as Canadians ever been able to differentiate between varieties of wheat in such a way that is maybe similar to differentiating between wines. Well Red Fife Wheat not only has a distinct flavour, the flavour completely changes depending on where the variety is grown, very similar to wine. Red Fife has been described to include an intense scent of herbs and vegetables colored with a light acidity. The nose has notes of anise and fennel and in the mouth the bread is unexpectedly rich with a slightly herby and spicy flavour. Such a description, could most certainly not be applied to the industrially bred varieties dominating the food supply of today.

SR: Merit of taste has never been considered important in Canada. And now thanks to the Slow Food movement taste is becoming something that people celebrate. Restaurants are celebrating the differences in taste in Heirloom Tomatoes. Well the same with wheat. We found at the first and the last bread and wheat festival that we had here in Victoria there were two accessions of Red Fife wheat being offered by bakers. One grown locally here in Metchosin and then one coming from Mark Loiselle's farm in Saskatchewan. And the flavor of that Red Fife was very distinct, it picked up the personality of the field where it was growing, yet the seed had come from the same original source.

So flavor and taste and nutritional components will vary even with the same variety. If you put in your garden in Nelson and I put it in my garden here in Victoria, that variety may taste different because the nutrients are being expressed because the chemistry of the soil and the interaction of the variety with the environment.

JS: Another interesting bit of information that came out of my conversation with Sharon Rempel, was the difference in appearance between Red Fife Wheat and the commercial export varieties of today.

SR: The old varieties have straws that will come up to your armpits. Modern varieties are up to your knees. When you see Richard Gere riding his horse in First Knight across the wheat plains, the horse has got the wheat up to his knees. Well that's a modern variety. The old varieties would have been up to the horse's mid-thigh. And the old varieties had old, long straw which was of course useful for bedding for animals, and you could turn the straw back into the soil to feed the soil microbiology. So the straws were seen as valuable. Modern varieties are short because modern equipment sees the straws as a hindrance. So value is just in taste and in the quality of the nutrients of the crop but also in the bi-products like straw.

JS: Now Red Fife wheat is currently being grown from Nova Scotia all the way to Vancouver Island, but Sharon Rempel does stress that Red Fife is just one of many heritage wheat varieties that regions across the country could be growing. And it was this that I would consider one of the most important points to take out of this topic of growing these highly adaptable varieties of food like Red Fife Wheat. Because once a locale begins growing crops that will naturally adapt to their surroundings, that crop begins to create economic value that commercial varieties would be unable to compete with. That so long as the variety becomes atuned to the bioregion in which it's growing, that crop takes on a distinct flavour and a distinct ability to grow well in the area. And this is, I would argue, perhaps the greatest rationale for encouraging the cultivation of regionally-specific crops, and that it really is, one of the most effective tools to challenge the industrial agricultural system.

SR: When we talk about wheat, I think many of us think about bread wheat's, Triticum aestivum, and there's probably a hundred thousand varieties of bread wheats in different gene banks and breeder collections around the world. That's a huge amount of biodiversity that could be explored for each bio-region. Red Fife isn't going to be adapted

for every region. And what I've been encouraging through the Heritage wheat project for years, and what I will continue to do through my new foundation, the Red Fife Green Seed foundation is local farmer groups taking a number of heirloom varieties and field trialing them. Not only because there's not a lot of quantity of these old varieties that you can just order a hundred pounds and start planting. You have to start with a five or ten year plan and start increasing the quantity of these seeds. Sometimes it takes a variety three years to adapt to a new bio-region and really get its personality developed. People will grow Red Fife because of its name and its appeal historically. But there are many many varieties. I've got a freezer of 300 varieties that I've collected including some varieties from Crete. Old land races, unnamed varieties that I'm starting to name as they go out into the field. In there I think I could find a wheat for any region of the world just because there's so much adaptability in these old varieties. So as your communities start to develop, as you say with the CSA it's a closed loop. People are pretty good when it's in a closed loop. You can just sell it as a red seed, you could sell it as hard red wheat, you could sell it. But the variety would be known in the community and that inherently is the value of community seed. That the story and the variety name should go with the variety because that's like just calling people, people, but there's all these beautiful cultural groups that have different dances and songs and celebrations and that's what the richness is, is in that diversity. And the same with the varieties.

JS: In just a moment we will listen in on what will be the radio debut of Salt Spring Island musician Phil Vernon's Red Fife Wheat song, recorded just a few days ago for airing on today's show. But before we hear this amazing tune that Phil also performed at Sharon Rempel's Bread and Wheat Festival, it's important to continue speaking about the tools available for communities to begin creating value on locally grown varieties of crops. Such crops create value for agritourism, heritage and culture. But what is a significant threat to the cultivation of such crops and the creation of such value, are patents and contamination from genetically modified crops. An important factor to consider when looking to foster such a system of local grain. And it's this that will present the segue into an upcoming broadcast on the creation of regions that are free of genetically engineered crops. This very dialogue was launched a few weeks ago here in the Kootenay region of British Columbia, and Deconstructing Dinner recorded that first meeting on creating a genetically engineered free region. And how such a campaign can perhaps tie in to the creation of local value found in local grain will be a topic for discussion on that future broadcast. And in raising these concerns, Sharon also refers to the new Red Fife Green Seed Foundation that she has created to help support the cultivation of heritage grains.

SR: This Red Fife Green Seed Foundation can be an inspiration for localities to start putting value on a locally grown Heirloom variety. And it doesn't have to be wheat. It could be an heirloom variety that's really adapted to your bio-region. It starts to add an agritourism focus, but it also starts to add value to locally grown. And it's not the value that the system is giving it. It's the value that the people are giving it. You see, because really these spoken traditional varieties are ones that are part of heritage and they belong in the public domain. And they cannot be monopolized by anybody. So they should be free. There should be a seed charter. A freedom for seeds, to be free from patents and

GMO interference and they should be free to be used by anybody in the public or commercial sector. So if you want to develop a commercial cereal that says 'heritage cereal' using these land races you should be free to do that, but I don't think you should be able to patent that variety.

It's an interesting political and legal state we're at now. People try to patent Red Fife. And I said you can't because that variety belongs to the people. I've been it's guardian for fifteen years. but I don't own it, it's just come into my life and I've had a chance to spread it around, and when I'm gone Red Fife will be around. These old varieties don't belong to anybody. The folk seeds are like folk songs, you know how they adapt? You sing the song in Nelson, you travel and you sing it in Victoria and the word will change a bit? Well that's what folk seeds are like. These old varieties, land races, traditional varieties, folk seeds belong to the people of the world. And this whole idea of national boundaries and being owned by a corporation is so foreign to these seeds. These seeds are kind of wild and they belong to people and yet they are so responsive and so beautiful when people get them in their fields they fall in love with the varieties. I could see how people would look at these varieties at the Bread and Wheat Festival and you could see their hearts change. I've had field days this past summer with Red Fife here in Metchosin, there was an acre growing and I had ten varieties of heirloom grains and club wheats and heirloom species wheats and people could touch them and you could see their faces change. That was pretty exciting because there's something happening between the people and the plant. And that's the magic. That's what I tried 20 years ago as an interpreter to do, make that link between the object and the visitor and it seems the wheat is one of the most glorious mediums to connect people to the past with hope for the future. I think that that's profound because it gives people an empowerment and it also empowers the seed. Who's speaking for the seed at UN meetings? Who's speaking for the seeds? We have to speak for the seeds because plants and their people have co-evolved and now we're in a new era of bringing these seeds back to our locale and they have a story to tell. We will create our own stories as they become part of local food systems and that to me is what folk seed is about.

Song Interlude:
In the beginning it was just the merriest handful
A few gains from Lasgaw in 1842
It was tough times for David Fife the farmer
If I'd see what hard spring wheat could do

They say the little that he planted ripened early
Proving more immune to rust, stronger in the frost and snow
And then every year he multiplied his harvest
Til it bore his name across Ontario

Red Fife Wheat
Treasure of the land
Like a golden promise in his hand
Red Fife Wheat

When summer breezes blow
It's so good to see the Red Fife grow

And it was the Red Fife that broke the northern prairie
Queen of Harvest for 50 years or more
Baring new strains to build a farming nation
And feed a hungry world at his door

(chorus)

It's true and constant as the prairie wind
From the times shrouded steps of Ukraine
This ancient land race sustained the farms of Canada
Our living heritage we can raise it up again

From Nova Scotia out to Vancouver Island
Red Fife Wheat is being sowed and harvested again
Food inspection agency don't like it
But farmers say they'll sow it just the same

(chorus)

repeat chords

JS: And that was the radio debut of Red Fife Wheat, by Salt Spring Island musician Phil Vernon. Contact information for Phil and links to some of his other food and farming tunes that have aired here on Deconstructing Dinner will be available on the website for today's show at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner.

And again this is Deconstructing Dinner, a weekly one-hour radio program and podcast produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman and this is part 1 of a new series here on the program titled Heritage Food: Preserving Diversity.

Up until now we've been listening in on segments from my interview with Sharon Rempel, an agronomist with expertise in organic production, seed conservation, and on-farm wheat breeding of heritage crops. In 1989, Sharon created the well known Seedy Saturday Seed Exchanges that now take place across the country. And she's also the Director of the Heritage Wheat Project, and the Designer of Grassroot Solutions. Sharon most recently hosted Canada's first ever Bread and Wheat Festival that took place in October in Victoria, a festival that highlighted the reemergence of Canada's most important heritage wheat variety, Red Fife Wheat.

Coming up in just a moment we will travel to Ontario and visit with an Heriloom Vegetable Farm, but in first closing out this segment on Red Fife Wheat, I'll leave you with Sharon's final comparison of old wheat varieties versus the hybrids of the modern

industrial food system of today, and her suggestion that farmers here in the Nelson area for one, should begin trying to grow some of these heritage varieties.

SR: That's why community seed programs are so important. I think the Red Fife Green Seed Foundation will be a place where people can give a bequest to help local seed programs, and we may end up being an educational outlet so we can get materials together on what value there is of traditional varieties and folk seeds. We're going to work really closely with Canada's Heritage Seed Program but they work more with veggies, flowers and other things, and it's important, and I can see the value of what the Red Fife Green Seed Foundation will end up doing. It's just new. It's just getting born this week. I don't know, it's going to be very interesting. When you start something new, I know what happens it's like another ten year commitment from life, but what else is there for me? These are my children. I didn't have babies. These old wheats are my children. And I guess that's my contribution back to keeping them alive. For the years, there were very few people interested in them. Now there's a lot. So these three hundred varieties in my freezer have to get out of my freezer, they have to get into fields. So if you folks would like to collaborate in Nelson and do some field trials I would like to encourage that. I hope what we can do for this coming growing season in the spring is have community groups like yourself and maybe others try the same varieties and then share the information on how the varieties did.

JS: And that was Sharon Rempel of Grassroot Solutions based in Victoria, BC. Contact information for Sharon will be posted on the Deconstructing Dinner website under part I of this Heritage Foods series here on the program. You can also contact her directly at 250-298-1133 or visit her website at grassrootsolutions.com. There will also be more information on the site that lists others across Canada who are working with Red Fife Wheat.

But moving over to Ontario, we arrive at an heirloom vegetable farm in the Niagara Region of Ontario, where Linda Crago is preserving, cultivating and selling heritage vegetables with her specialty being Tomatoes. The farm is called Tree and Twig Heirloom Vegetable Farm and is located in Wellandport on nine acres of land. Her vegetables end up in local restaurants or as part of her Community Supported Agriculture box program, and she also sells her plants through mail-order. And so I got in touch with a good friend who lives in the area and who also has, in the past, volunteered at CFBU in St. Catharines, one of the many stations in Canada airing Deconstructing Dinner.

Back in September, Marinko Jareb took a trip to Tree and Twig and sat down with Linda to learn more about her unique approach to preserving heritage varieties of vegetables.

Linda Crago: I've been doing this for ten years now. I was a social worker for about thirteen years and my first year I did sort of a subscription type thing which was comparable to a CSA but I didn't know that's what it was at the time. So I had about ten people that I was delivering bushels of vegetables to on a weekly basis throughout the summer. And that's sort of how I started. The garden has gotten sort of increasingly

larger over the years and I was introduced to heirlooms probably about 8 or 9 years ago and now that's pretty much exclusively what I grow.

JS: The word heirloom will be used constantly as this Heritage Foods series continues here on Deconstructing Dinner, and Linda Crago helps explain what constitutes an heirloom variety.

LC: The rule of thumb with heirlooms is 50 years. If they are varieties that have been around for 50 years or more then they're generally considered heirlooms. But there are always exceptions to that rule. There are some heirlooms that are family heirlooms, so they've been passed down from generation to generation in a family. And there are also this weird category that I have a hard time exactly figuring out but they call them 'created heirlooms.' Those are varieties that have been sort of created in the more recent past. Such as one of the heirlooms that are very popular like the green seed for tomato and the banana legs tomato. Those are all created heirlooms but what they've done is they've crossed two open pollinated varieties which theoretically would be a hybrid but they've kept working on it and working on it until it becomes an open pollinated variety itself. But typically you think of varieties as being heirlooms when they are at least 50 years old.

JS: These open pollinated heritage varieties have many benefits to farmers and to local food systems and Linda describes how they differ from the more common hybrid varieties found on grocery store shelves across the country.

LC: You have the ability to save your own seed. So it gives a farmer or gardener a lot of independence. You don't have to rely on seed companies every year to purchase your seed. And also heirlooms have stood the test of time. I find when I compare, for example, an heirloom tomato taste to the taste of a hybrid there is no comparison. The heirlooms, I think, are just superior in taste. I find that to be true for a lot of vegetables, tomatoes particularly but they are just varieties that have really stood the test of time and are, I think superior in flavor. A lot of hybrids are grown by big farmers because they depend on them shipping well and heirlooms don't ship well. You grow them because they taste good. To me that's the big difference, is that they taste good. And I think also there's so much diversity in heirlooms. The seed you can find to grow is unlike anything you've ever seen before. It's not like anything you'd ever see in the grocery store, the colors and the shapes, it's just very exciting.

JS: Tree and Twig Farm does offer a wide range of vegetables to its customers, but tomatoes have been the focus for Linda Crago for the past ten years, and she explains why.

LC: Tomatoes are my big thing. I pretty much grow every other crop too, but I pick tomatoes, I think because of the diversity that there is in tomatoes. I know that there are more than 5,000 different heirloom tomato varietes and every year there is a tomato that is starkly different than anything you've ever grown before. I've grown the peach tomatoes for quite a few years and they have a fuzzy skin, as opposed to a typical glossy

tomato skin. But this year I had some really cool tomatoes that were, some of them the size of a baseball, and they were peach skin tomatoes but they had really wild colors of striping on them. And it's really refreshing to keep finding new things that are out there. So tomatoes I think I like because the diversity is amazing and the tastes are amazing, so different from one another. So this year I sold transplants in the spring and I think I had about 200 or so varieties of transplants for sale. But in my own garden I think I had about 255 different kinds.

JS: Linda further added that there are many varieties of vegetables around the world that are at risk of disappearing, which of course further emphasizes how important farmers like her are in ensuring that others farmers, gardeners and communities choosing to disconnect themselves from the industrial food system, will be able to access these heritage varieties. As Marinko Jareb continued his visit with Linda Crago of Tree and Twig Farm in Wellandport Ontario, she took him on a brief tour of the property to explore the different tomato varieties found on the farm and to also, meet her heritage livestock, including this first member of the farm, Joey.

LC: This is Joey. He's a nice pig. He says 'where's my supper mom?' He's a nice guy. It's getting to be close to their supper, everybody is squawking at me 'where's our food?' She's a Muscovy. I've got three Muscovies and I've got the Indian Runner Ducks. We've got bunny rabbits and guinea pigs. I've got some chickens.

These are actually a heritage variety of chicken that are nearly extinct. When I got them, I hope it's changed now, there were three flocks in Canada of this kind. But then I was hoping I would get some baby chicks and pass them along to other farmers but I've only had one chick.

So you can see a lot of stuff is gone now. So this was beans and this was a sorghum that I put in the seed exchange that actually just came up from seed. When it came up I thought, 'Ah, we'll leave it.'

And different celeries and beets. I do all my salad crops up here. I'll go to market tomorrow and I always take salad, it's a big seller at market, and chard. I did a test garden for Organic Gardening Magazine so I've got that up there. They sent me a bunch of free seed, which is always nice.

This is a little tomato called puntabanda. I see a lot of them are starting to split now. It's hard to find any that aren't.

Look at the size of that thing. It's a mangel. I get the seed for these, the yellow ones from a fellow in Missouri and this one is from a fellow in Iowa. I grew up on a farm and my dad used to grow mangels to feed to our livestock.

I'm in the process of digging sweet potatoes but then you can see in here the tomatillos have re-seeded themselves. That's a Mexican, I don't know if you'd call it a fruit or

vegetable, it's a fruit I guess you'd say. They make salsa verde with that. So that's a tomatillo.

I've got ground cherries there, they've died off. But this is called physalis peruviana. That's the latin name for it. That's a beautiful fruit.

These are the ground cherries. That's not ready. I'll see if I can find one that is. See, try that, that's a ground cherry.

Huckleberries. I'm just getting the seed from them.

So this is one of my tomato patches. I've got about 400 plants or so in here and then I've got, my mom lives across the liver and I've got another 500 plants at her property.

That's a really nice tomato, it's a good one. It's called Dr. Caroline. Dr. Caroline Male was a professor at a University somewhere in New York State and that's where she lives. And actually she's listed in the seed exchange. She wrote a book called *One Hundred Heirloom Tomatoes for the American Garden*. She's a real tomato person. So that was named in honor of her.

We went down to Iowa this year to the Seed Saver's Exchange Annual Convention and we met Tom Wagner who created the Green Zebra Tomato. We sat in on his workshops and we talked to him quite a bit afterwards and he was explaining to us sort of his techniques and how he does it. And we came home saying we're going to do that. I have ideas about different ones I'd like to see crossed.

I grew some eggplants and peppers in here. These were my early tomatoes. It's just one variety, right down the center, I've got about 75 plants and it's a Czechoslovakian variety called Stupice which is always my earliest. I don't heat these two green houses, but close to the first week of June, so we've had tomatoes since then. The vast majority, like these ones, the outside ones, you get about a six week window of opportunity, like August and then into mid-September and then that's it for them. But those ones have produced quite well since then.

I got to show you some of these eggplants up here that are really neat. I wish I had one of these to show you, shoot, I picked one last night and I put it in my pocket. These are the hottest peppers in the world, they'll blow your head off. I don't see any red ones.

These were Peruvian corns and then I've got a quinoa and an amaryanth. There was like some grains and I've got some soybeans and other beans. So I'm trying to save all those. I can't save the corn because I know it would have cross-pollinated, but it was just an experience. Look at how tall some of it is. It's unbelievable. And then this green house, all of the stuff I've started I'm going to put in here for winter growing.

JS: And this is Deconstructing Dinner where you've been listening to segments from a visit by Marinko Jareb to Tree and Twig Heirloom Vegetable Farm located in Wellandport, a small community in the Niagara region of Ontario.

As Marinko continued his tour of this farm that is working on preserving heritage varieties of vegetables, he asked Linda Crago if the changing weather patterns that many farmers are now facing have impacted her farm.

LC: Fairly predictable then, but it's really not anymore. Springs can be so difficult. I notice the falls are really long now. So the season can go a lot longer.

Yep, those are eggplants. A lot of the African ones are bitter, so those are more bitter. But this is what I want to show you, if I can find any. Here, yeah look at these things, this is an eggplant from Thailand. It's called Thai Green Pea.

Marinko Jareb: The plant looks almost like a fig tree and it has these little white flowers and then little tiny green fruits that are about the size of a pea.

LC: And that's called Green Pea Eggplant. Isn't that cool?

MJ: That is really cool.

LC: That's why I like to grow this stuff, it's so neat. It's amazing. A lot of the other eggplants, a lot of the ones from Thailand are really neat. Well that's a Japanese one, but then look at these, nice little guys and then we got stripy little guys, we've got orange, we got purple, we got white, we got yellow. You can see everything is passed its peak now, but there's some amazing variety. But it's been a good tomato year for sure, there's been a lot of tomatoes. Those are like a little grape roma. Oh, I'll show you this one is hilarious. Look at this tomato.

MJ: These are the ones my friend had at her restaurant.

LC: They're funny eh? Who's your friend?

MJ: Alex Linesky from Pan in St. Catharines.

LC: Yeah, she bought the plants from me.

MJ: She gave me a couple of these, I saved the seeds.

LC: Aren't they funny?

MJ: They're hilarious, they're like little clusters of tomato pods.

LC: Yup, and each one is different. I've got some that are as big as baseballs and they're like that.

JS: As the farm tour continues, an important comment is raised on how heritage varieties of plants help stimulate childhood memories or memories in general, and it's comments such as these, that truly emphasize the cultural and social significance of preserving heritage foods that have been long threatened by the soulless, industrial food system.

LC: You know what I think? I think everybody should have their own vegetable garden. People are so far removed from what they eat that I've had 40 year old people out here that say to me, 'Wow, is that how a broccoli grows? I've never actually seen a broccoli growing in the ground.' It just absolutely amazes me. I think the world would be a better place if everybody had their own vegetable garden. I don't sell seed. I list my seed only in the seed exchange, but I sell the plants in the spring. But it's surprising, every year people are more interested and more interested in the different varieties. I've had a lot of older people come and I remember a number of people who have grown up on really big tomato farms and they say, 'We just can't find decent tomatoes anymore.' They'll say like, 'This is the variety my dad used to grow and we had thousands of these plants and can you find this variety?' And so I find the variety and I sell them the plants, and a few people get back to me and say 'wow, I feel like I'm a kid about.' So that's where taste takes you. It really does. There are some varieties I grow just for certain people because they're not the most wildly popular but they mean a lot to those people, so it's cool.

JS: And that concluded Marinko Jareb's farm tour with Linda Crago of Tree and Twig Farm. And I think it's important to note that Marinko and Linda did not know each other at all prior to that visit but if you do recall form that last segment, it was a tomato, and the uniqueness of how that tomato looked, that allowed Marinko and Linda to recognize a common acquaintance between the two of them. And this again is another great example of the power of food to connect people and bringing people together.

In wrapping up today's broadcast and in nearing the end of his time at Linda's farm, Marinko ended his visit by asking Linda what she thought of the future of agricultural diversity in Canada.

LC: I don't think I'd say that I'm optimistic. When you look around here because this is our field, like I said to the farmer who uses this, I said 'it's got to be a non-GMO organic corn. You wont put anything else in my field.' But when you drive down all these roads you see all the corn and soybeans, and it's all genetically modified and it's all purchased hybrid seed and it just is really sad.

With Seeds of Diversity, to me, it looks like that listing is getting smaller and smaller every year. Maybe heirloom vegetables and fruits are more popular now, but is it a fad? People like to eat them, but do they like to grow them and save the seed and do all that stuff? I don't think they necessarily do. So I don't know. I'm a little pessimistic. I'm just such a small grower and I don't know of any big farmers around here that are interested in heirlooms, or heirloom grains. I think the big seed companies are doing their number on farmers. We like to go up to the big outdoor farm show in Woodstock. We walk around there and you feel like you're in another world because it's all Monsanto and the

big seed companies and the big chemical companies and the big machinery and that's farming. It's unfortunate. I can't say I'm overly optimistic about it. There's interest, but when it comes to doing the work I don't know. I don't know where people's heads are at.

JS: And that was farmer Linda Crago of Tree and Twig Heirloom Vegetable Farm located in Wellandport, Ontario. You can learn more about Tree and Twig by visiting their website at treeandtwig.com.

And you can stay posted to the Deconstructing Dinner website to learn more on today's topic and when future broadcasts of this Heritage Foods series will air.

ending theme

That was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman. I thank my technical assistant John Ryan.

The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.

This radio program is provided free of charge to campus/community radio stations across the country, and relies on the financial support from you the listener. Support for the program can be donated through our website at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner or by dialing 250-352-9600.