

Producing special satisfaction

Siobhan Walsh - Siobhan Walsh

In a venue that felt more like a retreat than a conference room, I recently spent a day at the Santuario Sisterfarm in nearby Boerne learning about the farm's mission to promote good nutrition and wellness in our communities.

The Sisterfarm is a seven-acre respite dedicated to cultural diversity, sustainable living and food cultivation. It looks and feels like a family farm or commune, its residents are Dominican Sisters, Catholic nuns dedicated to conservation.

"We use permaculture ethics and policies," said Carol Coston, the farm's co-director. "The values of permaculture are earth care, people care and fair share."

In an economy that seems to reward only corporate food production and distribution, and stacks the deck against both the rapidly vanishing family farm and the local production and consumption of healthy foods, Santuario is an appealing throwback.

Free-range chickens hunt and peck the perimeters of composting areas. Raised bed vegetable gardens dot the property and beets, chard, sorghum, lettuce and other bounty thrive under covers that protect them from insects and the September sun.

A dry creek that runs along the property's border attests to the ongoing drought and the need to conserve water. Hand-constructed ground berms and swales, and rooftop water catchment systems, help capture water used to irrigate olive trees, herb gardens and amaranth plants, an ancient grain.

Dion Turner, president of the San Antonio Dietetic Association and director of food services at Lifecare Hospital, organized our one day seminar at Santuario.

I was invited to lead a yoga class for the participants, and gladly accepted the opportunity to share the teachings of a discipline that has been practiced for 5,000 years, or as long as man has been farming amaranth.

There is special satisfaction in preparing and sharing locally produced food, yet many of the foods in our diet come from far away. □ We can enjoy Maine or New Jersey blueberries in our smoothies, a ripe banana from Honduras, or a glass of Malbec from Argentina, but we can also choose to buy grass-fed beef from a local rancher, peaches from Fredericksburg, and strawberries, okra or cut flowers from Poteet.

It's all in the balance.

“When we are buying foods from the local farmers the message is: I believe deeply enough in what you are trying to do,” said Robert Maggiani, chief marketing specialist for the Texas Department of Agriculture.

Only two percent of the U.S. population is engaged in the production of the food we eat. The more we support Santuario and other local producers, the more local food will be brought to market for all of us to share.

That's the lesson I took home, a welcome reminder for this teacher that all of us have something to give to one another.

Maggiani also gave all who attended the seminar a GO TEXAN shopping bag with a cutting board inside. “A cutting board only for Texas produce,” he joked.

Texas citrus season starts next week.

Siobhan Walsh is a registered dietitian. Her Smart Choices column appears every other Monday in SA Life. Email her at siobhanrd@yahoo.com. □ □