Sweet Potato Essentials

COOKING BY CROCK POT

IT'S HOT TODDY TIME

SAVORY, WINTER COBBLER
PRAIRIE CROSSING, AT A JUNCTION:

*Saving Farmland and Building Community*
Drive about an hour outside Chicago or hop on the Metra Milwaukee District/North Line, and you’ll find a farm. Many farms, actually. And surrounding them, at the junction with the North Central Line, you’ll see a cluster of colorful, Midwestern-style homes with large front porches, red-painted roofs and other Earth-tone accents. Nearby, bikers fly past meadows of tall grass gently swaying back and forth. During the warmer months, you might see a small sailboat or two on the calm, blue waters of Lake Aldo Leopold. On weekends, a farmers market opens in the center square of this community, where fruits and vegetables of all shapes and sizes spill out on tables, topped with green and white checkered cloths. You might see a horse or two, a herd of goats, some chicken. At night, you can actually see the stars—all of them.

This is Prairie Crossing.

Founded in 1987, by a group of neighbors who wanted to preserve the open space and native land, and guided by community activists and philanthropists Vicky and George Ranney, Jr., the Prairie Crossing area has become an epicenter for “green” home building, innovative architecture, organic agriculture and the next generation of farmers. Without the advocacy of its residents though, Prairie Crossing could have easily become something else.

“In the seventies and eighties, the site that is now Prairie Crossing was scheduled for development, and it would have been very dense, dramatically changing the rural nature of the area,” says Vicky Ranney, who at the time was living in Hyde Park with George. “My husband and I were asked to be the officers of the corporation created to develop what is now Prairie Crossing.”

The timing and appropriateness of their selection was fitting. George Ranney, Jr., an attorney with Mayer, Brown, Rowe & May, a former steel company executive and former deputy budget director for the state of Illinois, grew up on a farm near the Libertyville/Grayslake area. He often traveled back to his childhood home to visit his family on weekends. So his passion and love for the community was already there. Vicky Ranney, who spent some time working out of the University of Chicago libraries, was editor of Frederick Law Olmsted’s papers. Olmsted was a 19th century, revered city planner and scholar, who helped design Central Park in New York City and in Chicago, the Midway Plaisance and World’s Columbian Exposition. He was also responsible for Washington Park, Jackson Park and a handful of other historic places, so Vicky was well versed in city planning. The Ranneys were the right people at the right time to work on this project.

So in 1993, after many years living on the city’s South Side and “planning Prairie Crossing from the kitchen table,” the recent empty-nesters packed up their Hyde Park home and moved north to Lake County, settling in an old farm house to be closer to their work. Their job was simple, yet challenging: preserve the community’s natural charm, land and resources, but help it grow with forward-thinking initiatives that could serve future generations of residents and farmers.

“We looked at the history of the site, which had initially been open prairie. And since the first settlers arrived, it has had agriculture of one sort or another. We felt particularly that any new development should be based on sustainable principles that would ensure the health of the land and of the people.”

— VICKY RANNEY —
Philanthropist and Community Activist
Prairie Crossing
to include this idea of agriculture, but we felt particularly that any new development should be based on sustainable principles that would ensure the health of the land and of the people. We did not believe people should be living right next to industrial farming because of all the chemical inputs required for that.”

Instead, Prairie Holdings Corporation, of which George Ranney, Jr. serves as Chairman and CEO, carved out 100 acres specifically for organic farming. Regular access to this local, sustainable food was also important. “CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) were just starting to come into existence at the time,” Ranney says. Through the CSA and regular farmers market, “the community has a source for really healthy food all throughout the growing season. All CSAs allow you to know your farmers, but in this case, people are living right next door to them.”

Prairie Crossing has also been recognized in countless magazines and news articles for its commitment to green building and sustainable architecture. The area homes, despite their traditional look, save 50% more energy compared to other Chicago-area residences. The local charter school, which the Ranneys also helped found, has earned LEED Gold certification, the highest designation from the U.S. Green Building Council. It runs on geothermal alternative energy sources. Byron Colby Barn, a dairy barn built in 1885 and renovated in the late 1990s, serves as a community center and site for weddings, concerts and school events.

Prairie Crossing, however, has gone beyond serving as a residential community for architectural integrity and local food preservation. It has served as an incubator for the next generation of farmers.

“As our farming population ages in this country, we need to have more opportunities that encourage young people to get into farming, and especially because many don’t have a farming background,” says Mike Sands, the founding Executive Director and current Senior Associate of the Liberty Prairie Foundation. The foundation manages a trust set up by the Ranneys. It protects and funds the Farm Business Development Center for budding farmers, as well as, The Learning Farm and its various initiatives, which includes youth camp programs, children’s activities, public tours and more. “In fact, the average farmer in this country is 55 years old on average,” Sands points out. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 40% of American farmers are that age or even older.

The Farm Business Development Center makes it possible for new farmers to start small, while receiving business guidance and support from people like Sands. Sands is an experienced business executive and agriculture specialist, whom the Ranneys recruited years ago from the Rodale Institute in Pennsylvania, for this very purpose.

The program’s application process is competitive. Farmers must write a lengthy business plan discussing short and long-term goals and meet with other farmers and staffers on the property. “They will be working side-by-side with other farmers every day so it’s important that everyone gets along,” Sands says.

Farmers involved in the program also have access to mentorship and educational support from Sandhill Family Farms, formerly Sandhill Organics, one of the more successful, long-running farms on the property. Vicky Ranney recruited them early on to serve as the main source for the on-site CSA and farmers market foods. Occasionally, the FBDC teams up with Angelic Organics’ farmer training program to offer added learning opportunities.

“Many of these new farmers don’t have access to land right away,” Sands says. “They’re bright, hardworking and may even have some business management training or worked on other farms, but they don’t have access to the capital to buy land as they start their business.”
“Farming has a strong and important tradition of mentoring, apprenticeship and hands-on learning,” says Jen Miller, who has managed the farm for the past couple of years with husband, Jeff and friends, Matt and Peg Sheaffer. “In our time at Prairie Crossing, we’ve worked with farms within the FBDC to discuss crop planting, irrigation techniques, weed control, field layout, tractor operation and maintenance, organic certification, marketing employee management and more. While you can read books, there is nothing like planting a bed of tiny onions in early spring and taking the time, effort and passion to help it grow. We feel a sense of duty to carry on the tradition of sharing and paying it forward to those in our farming community.”

Learning takes place in the field, as well as, in the greenhouse, with spontaneous and scheduled sessions facilitated through a two-hour group-planning meeting in the beginning of the season. “The next generation of farmers aren’t always lucky enough to live next door to someone who’s been farming for 20 years,” Miller says. “This is especially true when it comes to growing vegetables and raising animals in the way and scale that we do.”

Husband and wife team Alison Parker and Alex Needham of Radical Root Farm, know what it’s like to be lucky in this way. For the past four years, they’ve grown their business from a small one-acre farm to a larger operation selling at the Prairie Crossing, Green City and Logan Square farmers markets. They also sell to some wholesale outlets like Dill Pickle Co-op, and to their more than 80 CSA subscribers, a subscription figure that doubles each year. From Chioggia beets to Tokyo Bekana greens and a wide variety of heirloom tomatoes, eggplants, cucumbers and other produce, Parker and Needham plan to acquire livestock and grow their fresh egg business.

Even with a generous grant from the Frontera Farmer Foundation, the FBDC “has definitely been the biggest help for us. We couldn’t do what we are doing without having been at Prairie Crossing,” says Parker, especially since they were first-generation farmers and had minimal farm business management knowledge. “We had some savings when we started our business, but because we were able to rent a little land and equipment by the hour and not immediately have to buy a whole tractor and other things, we were able to grow our profits, so we could rent less and buy more over time.”

While at Prairie Crossing, Radical Root has earned organic certification for their produce, something FBDC encourages. Often criticized for its lengthy paperwork and sometimes added costs, Sands says applying for organic certification represents yet another good business practice. Think accounting for farmers. “Learning to keep track of your paperwork is an important skill for any business,” he says.

Having “maxed out” their space at Prairie Crossing, it is likely Radical Root will move to a larger farm by next season. And, that’s the point. “One of the missions of the Farm Business Development Center, is to help farmers grow enough to be able to move on,” Parker says. Until then, she’s optimistic about the next generation of farmers. “I feel the more education about our current food system that is available helps builds a stronger local food movement and more holistic way of farming,” she says. “We are seeing more young farmers come into the business, so that’s definitely something that isn’t going to die down anytime soon.” Welcome to sustainable agriculture 2.0.

Amelia Levin is a chef and a writer who is always up for an adventure—from Chicago’s neighborhoods and rooftop gardens to the outlying fields along the back roads of Illinois. She is the author of Chicago Chefs Tables and is a regular contributor to Edible Chicago.