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Altadena Junction: Altadena's food revolution

By Timothy Rutt

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Is Altadena the center of a food revolution?

Sure, we've got fast-food chains and a handful of fine independent restaurants, but why is Altadena getting a reputation as a foodie paradise?

Because we have a revolution going on in backyards and home kitchens, with individual growers, bakers and craftspeople displaying a passion for good, healthy and interesting food. They raise crops, they bake, they keep goats and chickens, they carve edible fungi from their trees, and they bring a hand-crafted sensibility to what they do.

This revolution is springing up through myriad individuals and groups. There's RIPE Altadena (Ripe In-season Produce Exchange), where backyard farmers meet monthly to trade their excess crops. There's the Arroyo Food Co-op, an Altadena-based organization that is selling memberships and working hard to create an alternative, local source of groceries in the area.

The spiritual center of Altadena's food revolution, though, is in one of the largest homes in town, on Mariposa Street. Stephen Rudicel's family bought the dilapidated estate of famed Western novelist Zane Grey in the early 1970s. Rudicel, a lecturer in interdisciplinary studies at Cal Poly Pomona and the owner of the Press restaurant in Claremont, moved back to the home about eight years ago along with his fiancée, Gloria Putnam, who works in sales and engineering for Eastman Kodak Co.

The pair worked hard on the estate over the years, but not just to keep the wear and tear at bay. They've also turned it into an urban farm.

"We did our best to kill the lawn," Putnam said. "We've been replacing it with edibles."

Indeed, the front yard has a collection of raised garden beds growing a variety of crops, covered with netting to keep away the chickens.

Yes, they keep chickens — what farm doesn't? — but the estate is known for its goats. The Mariposa Creamery is Putnam and Rudicel's micro-dairy, where the output of their small herd goes to create a variety of cheeses and supplies them with fresh milk. (Health authorities frown on home dairies unless they follow a bunch of regulations, so only the couple legally can enjoy the fruits of their labors).

Putnam is a force of nature whose involvement extends beyond urban homesteading to other causes such as the Arroyo Time Bank, where members can bank hours of their own labor and barter with others. Under the Time Bank's umbrella, Putnam helped put together the Altadena Urban Farmer's Market.

The farmer's market was an almost-monthly event held on the estate grounds, where home cooks, bakers, craftspeople and small-scale food producers set up booths and sold their wares. More than 300 people attended the first market in October 2010 despite driving rain. Month to month, it continued to grow. In fact, it grew too big for the estate. The final market in May lured more than 1,000 people, including many from L.A.'s west side.

But it seems that Altadena's food revolution is just beginning. In Part II, we'll look at the soon-to-open weekly Altadena Farmer's Market and market manager Joseph Shuldiner's ambitious plans for it.

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