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A small farm in the shadow of the Cabrini Green public housing project in Chicago grows 30 varieties of fragile-skinned heirloom tomatoes. Photographs by Kenneth Dickerman for The New York Times

A Garden Flourishes Amid Chicago's Projects

By MONICA DAVEY

CHICAGO, Aug. 24 — The buffalo mozzarella at Fortunato, a tony restaurant in this city's Wicker Park neighborhood, is flown in from Naples, Italy, but some of the tomatoes tucked beside the cheese come from a place far closer. Though the diners here know nothing of it, the gourmet tomatoes are grown on the unlikelyst of farms, in a lot beside Cabrini Green, long one of the nation's most notorious public housing projects.

On the little North Side lot, tomato plants and sunflowers poke up into a horizon that on one end includes Chicago's downtown skyline and on the other reveals the remaining towers of the deteriorating housing development. The tiny fenced farm draws stares from the people who live here.

"Looks like home to me," Mattie Dix, who is 72, said admiringly, as she gazed through the fence the other day. "Alabama."

But others seem puzzled by the farm, even skeptical. "That won't be there long," said Jerome Taylor, who grew up in Cabrini Green four decades ago. "I don't even know what they are doing here, but there's no way this will last."

Actually, Mr. Taylor is right. It will not last, nor was it ever meant to. But at a time when Cabrini Green and the rest of the city's high-rise public housing developments are coming down, and when whatever will come next is not yet complete, a farmer has stepped in with his own dream.

Although city gardens are hardly a new concept, what makes this one different, aside from its especially urban setting, is that its produce has become a popular commodity for some of the city's finest restaurants.

Worlds away from Cabrini Green and worlds away as well from the expensive restaurants that now

feature his vegetables, Ken Dunn grew up on a farm in Kansas.

He moved here in the 1960's to study philosophy at the University of Chicago, and has spent much of the past 30 years wandering the city trying to transform it into a place that recycles its waste, reuses its old machinery, composts its scraps and creates an alternative economy that is, in his eyes, both sustainable and just.

Mr. Dunn, who is 69, wears dirt-caked work boots and a plain baseball cap and has a small puff of hair beneath his bottom lip. His philosophy has a pragmatic edge.

"The back-to-nature movement did intrigue me," Mr. Dunn said last week, as he sat on a stack of hay in the lot beside Cabrini Green and accepted the mud-covered rocks presented to him, one after the next, by his 2-year-old son, Soren. "But it intrigued me with the full knowledge that the world would arrive with bulldozers some day."

The city-owned land near Division Street and Clybourn Avenue is ultimately to be used for mixed income housing and businesses.

But for now — as the city waits for a development deal — the land is empty, and the city has allowed Mr. Dunn's nonprofit organization to build a temporary organic farm on a lot that is smaller than an acre, no charge.

Alicia Berg, the city's planning and development commissioner, said she viewed Mr. Dunn's idea as an innovative experiment, and one that matches Mayor Richard M. Daley's desire for the "greening" of Chicago. The city has recently agreed to let Mr. Dunn expand the farm onto a second acre, just south of the current farm. A mound of dirt awaits.

"To a certain extent, it looks out of place," said Walter Burnett Jr., who grew up in Cabrini Green and is now the alderman for the ward that includes it. His memory of the land from years past was bleaker: a vacant lot and lots of weeds.

Mr. Dunn has hauled in rich dirt and wood chips. He uses no chemicals. He admires bumblebees as the best pollinators. He has a compost pile decomposing nearby, steam rising.

And while his organization, the Resource Center, is nonprofit, Mr. Dunn and his partner, Kristine Greiber, by no means view these crops as a way for rich buyers to give charity for something grown in a rough neighborhood.

"This is not a hobby," Mr. Dunn said. "This is a real product, and part of that is that it must make money. To make a permanent change in society, it has to function in the existing economy, being able to bring its benefits while paying its bills."

Razor wire tops the fence that surrounds the farm, and though Mr. Dunn and Ms. Greiber will sell to locals who stop at the gate for lowered rates, they charge steep prices to restaurants. Their 30 varieties of prized, fragile-skinned heirloom tomatoes, for example, go for \$3 to \$3.50 a pound. The farm can produce about \$45,000 in vegetables in a year, Mr. Dunn said.

Chefs in some of the city's best-known restaurants, meanwhile, are well aware of where these vegetables are grown, and interested in many of Mr. Dunn's thoughts about food and waste and sustainable living.

"But I don't do anything here as a do-gooder thing," said Bruce Sherman, chef at the North Pond restaurant in Lincoln Park, who favors Mr. Dunn's beets, onions and specialty lettuce. "As a cook, this is about the quality of the products — first and foremost, it tastes good and looks good."

George Bumaris, executive chef for the Ritz-Carlton, prefers the tomatoes, which sometimes arrive still warm from the sun.

"To me, this sounded a little weird in the beginning," Mr. Bumaris said of Mr. Dunn's farm. "But when we brought the tomatoes in the kitchen — well, I didn't grow up on a farm, but I know what a tomato should taste like."



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