

New report details successes and best practices in heritage food recovery

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A new national survey of heritage food recovery edited by Gary Paul Nabhan, the UA Kellogg Endowed Chair in Sustainable Food System, has been released indicating an important trend in food recovery.

A new report detailing findings of a national survey of heritage [food](#) recovery has revealed that despite high numbers of endangered plants

and animals, thousands of unique fruits, vegetables and other food items are returning to American markets and tables.

More than 100,000 plant and animal varieties have become endangered over the last quarter century, many of which were formerly used for food or beverages, said Gary Paul Nabhan, the University of Arizona Kellogg Endowed Chair in Sustainable Food Systems.

Nabhan edited the new report, "[Conservation You Can Taste: Best Practices in Heritage Food Recovery and Successes in Restoring Agricultural Biodiversity Over the Last Quarter Century](#)," having investigated those [food items](#) generally defined as being historically available and also locally and regionally important to various communities.

As the report notes, heritage foods include heirloom vegetables, grains and fruit trees in addition to historic breeds of livestock and flocks, which are important for cultural and biological diversity.

In addition, it is commonly believed that only about 100 species of crops and livestock provide most of the food in the world because industrialized agriculture and national grocery store chains have reduced the food biodiversity available to shoppers. This has had nutritional consequences, especially for youth and the elderly.

"But in our survey data, we found a remarkable counter trend has occurred in America's gardens and orchards, and on its farms and ranch pastures," said Nabhan of The Southwest Center at the UA.

"Although virtually unnoticed in some circles, more than 15,000 unique vegetable, fruit, legume and grain varieties and dozens of livestock and poultry breeds have returned to U.S. foodscapes, farmers markets, restaurants and home tables over the last quarter century," he said.

The report, published by The Southwest Center in collaboration with Slow Foods USA and the Chefs Collaborative through a grant from the Amy P. Goldman Foundation, is "really a summary of the last 15 years of our collaborative conservation work," said Nabhan, who is also the co-founder of Renewing America's Food Traditions and Native Seeds/SEARCH.

The report's three goals are:

- To document the growth in the production, sales and use of America's heritage foods over the last 25 years
- To discover the best practices for advancing the market recovery of heritage foods in their communities of origin
- To identify likely future advances and challenges in conserving and ethically utilizing food biodiversity

The survey also documents that at least 640 species of crops and livestock are now on the plates of Americans participating in alternative food networks. Literally thousands of small farmers and ranchers are now gaining part of their livelihoods from growing these foods and offering value-added products derived from them.

"The University of Arizona is one of several universities that have helped to forge alliances between farmers, ranchers, chefs, millers, meat processors and farmers' market managers over the last quarter century to re-diversify our food system," Nabhan said. "The cumulative result of this 'it takes a village' approach to collaborative conservation has benefited our communities, nutritionally, economically and environmentally."

Some of the best practices for heritage food restoration include: creating on-the-ground collaborations, such as those between famers and chefs; explaining the unique histories and values of endangered foods; focusing

on making foods accessible and affordable; building a community of "amateur experts" who share their insights on ideal growing conditions; and identifying mentors and specialists who can help beginning farmers, millers and chefs.

As the production of heritage foods continues to ramp up, Nabhan believes it will be important for communities to invest in appropriately-scaled processing facilities.

"Such efforts not only require support for a new cohort of young farmers – for the first time in 50 years, the number of American farmers is increasing – but it demands that we rebuild the mid- and small-scale infrastructure of food processing such as flour mills, community canning kitchens and meat processing facilities that once dotted the country," Nabhan said.

To help social entrepreneurs secure support for such processing facilities, Nabhan will be co-hosting the first Arizona Food and Farm Finance Forum Jan. 14-15 at the UA's Biosphere 2 in Oracle, Ariz.

For example, the Southwest once had more than 75 small grist mills to provide locally grown flour for bread and tortillas, Nabhan said. The UA has been assisting Hayden Flour Mills in Tempe in its efforts to bring back some of the rarest grains and beans in North America, including White Sonora wheat, which can now be found in more than 30 Arizona bakeries, microbreweries and farmers' markets. And for the first time in a half century, it is being grown on 66 acres of tribal and private lands in Arizona.

Nabhan says that heritage foods are an important part of providing nutrient diversity to the poor and food insecure. Already, efforts are underway to assure that heirloom vegetable seeds, seedlings and fruit tree cuttings are made more accessible to low-income families through

"seed libraries," such as the a half-dozen seed outlets coordinated through the Pima County Public Library system, and through SNAP program benefits used at [farmers'](#) markets.

In the new report, Melissa Kogut, executive director of Chefs Collaborative, writes that many Americans are changing the way they view food.

"It's certainly a different landscape than when Chefs Collaborative was founded in 1993, when diners were lucky if the tomatoes on their plates were anything other than the two or three firm, red, tasteless high producing industry standards," Kogut said.

"Nowadays, delicious varieties of heirloom tomatoes are commonplace on supermarket shelves and restaurant menus. Chefs – and consumers along with them – have turned to heritage foods for a variety of reasons," she said. "Chief among them are taste and chefs' incurable curiosity for new ingredients and flavors. But it's also recognition that cultural and biological diversity are essential for the health of the earth and its inhabitants."

Provided by University of Arizona

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