

# PEOPLE

BY BETSY LEVY

## OUR MAN IN THE FIELD

It's high noon at the Austin Whole Foods flagship store, and serious foodies are pouring through the sliding glass doors in search of a reviving goji berry smoothie or a handful of picante-glazed pistachios. Shoppers are surrounded by fruit and vegetables in mounds, baskets, ranks, stacks, pyramids and buckets.

Half-hidden behind a bunker of bananas, a lean Asian-American man with a shaved head and heavily tattooed arms listens intently as an elderly shopper expresses her sympathy for local ranchers. Her case heard, the shopper contentedly wheels her cart away, and Thuan Nguyen, Whole Foods's local produce liaison, turns his attention back to what he knows best—produce.

Whole Foods CEO John Mackey has acknowledged that when food shoppers think of the best, freshest and most wholesome food, they now add “local” to “organic.” Thus the creation, in 2006, of Thuan's job. As part of the store's new initiatives, he'll be sourcing local produce for 14 Whole Foods stores in Texas and Louisiana.

Foraging—the industry term for the essential work of relationship-building between farmers and produce managers—involves much hand-shaking, many farm visits, and a lot of time on the road. The goal, Thuan says, is to keep the local food network humming by connecting urban and rural.

“By the end of this fiscal year,” Thuan says, “[Whole Foods] aims to make local produce between 15 and 20 percent of the produce we carry in this region. That's doubling what we had last year.” In the process, he'll be talking to a lot of rural farmers.

“Building those relationships doesn't happen overnight,” he observes. “It takes time to develop comfort levels on both sides.”

Thuan is very careful to share no names—he worries about playing favorites or failing to speak glowingly enough of any

given farmer. (What a disappointment for this writer, who was hoping for leads on the best local strawberries.)

He talks more openly about dogs (he owns two 90-pound pit bulls) and babies (his first child, a girl named Quynh, is only a few months old) and produce in general. It's always been a big part of his life.

Thuan's father, a first-generation Vietnamese immigrant, managed the produce department of a high-end food market south of Los Angeles, and Thuan worked beside him from the ninth grade on, after school and on weekends. At 18, he was stacking produce full-time, and, in 1996, he took over the produce aisles at Mother's Market and Kitchen, an iconic L.A. natural foods store. Five years as produce manager at Bristol Farms, a gourmet grocery chain, followed. After his marriage to Christina in 2002, Thuan moved to Tempe, Arizona, “strictly for the cheaper housing,” he says.

There, Thuan found a niche at Whole Foods. But rustling up more than the occasional local organic citrus crop was a real challenge. Under Arizona's strict pest-control regulations, much of what was shipped in had to be fumigated, rendering it instantly non-organic. And Tempe's hot, arid climate wasn't a friendly place to grow green.

The heart of Whole Foods is in central Texas. That was the best place to be, Thuan decided, to support local growers.

Here in Austin, the hot months can be tough on organic farmers, but since winter growing is still unfamiliar to some, many local growers specialize in seasons.

“It just depends on what they've figured out how to grow,” Thuan says, “which season they know more about.”

The demand for local, organic produce in Texas continues to be far greater than the supply, so Thuan's job goes beyond “sourcing” and into informal counseling. He's advised some growers on mak-



Photography: Carole Topalian

ing the switch from selling direct at farmers' markets to selling wholesale.

"I think it's tougher," he says, "because the grower has to get used to planning further out. They also have to develop more than one wholesale relationship, because no one retailer can guarantee that they'll buy everything someone grows." And selling wholesale pays a farmer less per bunch of beets than direct-selling. On the other hand, wholesale growers don't have to put in hours each week at farmers' market stands.

"I try to be careful not to get their hopes up too soon," Thuan explains. "But I also reassure them that maybe we can get them in just one store, so they don't have to deal on the large scale of the distribution center." It's one way to stay, well, local.

To local farmer Carol Ann Sayle, this is a very important distinction. "We want local food to be strong. How far away is local? Dallas isn't local in Austin—it's 200 miles away!"

Sayle's husband, farmer Larry Butler, appreciates the reliability Thuan brings to the job of local-produce liaison. "Whole Foods is a big company," he points out. "We'd know one Whole Foods connection and then eight months later he'd get sent to California." The time it takes a store to buy from many small growers instead of one big supplier can frustrate produce buyers, Larry says, and sometimes they play hardball with prices. "If a farmer gets their nose bloody that way, sometimes they give up and go away," he says. "Now, a pee-wee grower, someone small, like us—if they have a problem, they can go to Thuan."

When all works as it should, Thuan bridges the gap between the rural world most produce suppliers live in and the ultra-urban Whole Foods flagship store.

"Sometimes a farmer comes to see their produce in the bins," Thuan says, "and they just look around, shake their heads, and say 'Wow.' It's not what they expect."

Thuan may not be what they expect, either. With his serious expression and tattoo-covered arms, he's as urban/hip as they come. It's hard not to wonder how an Amer-Asian guy from L.A. goes over with Central Texas farmers.

But when asked if any of that's an issue, Thuan remembers only stories of the somewhat distant past. "There was some tension in the 1980s in Houston and New Orleans, when Vietnamese immigrants came in and used fishing techniques that worked better than what the local fishermen were doing."

In fact, Thuan gets worked up about stereotyping only when defending his beloved pit bulls against negative perceptions of the breed. "They look tough, but they take care of people! When Christina was pregnant, they protected her. They wouldn't even let me get near her sometimes."

But he downplays any personal experiences of culture clash. "By phone, I sound like anyone else," Thuan says. "I've been in the US since I was two years old. But when people meet me, they're surprised that I'm Asian. I'm Thuan, I tell them, like Juan, only with a T."

"I tell him he needs to get himself a pickup and a straw hat," says Larry Butler, with a grin. "And maybe a pair of boots."

## GREEN CORN GARDEN

### A HARVEST FOR BODY AND SOUL

BY SUZANNE HURLEY

Toni Rockwell believes in eating locally, and she walks the walk. The vegetables she grows commute 15 feet from her garden to her kitchen. For breakfast, she might harvest spinach, sauté it with olive oil and garlic, and scramble some eggs to put on top. She snacks on beans or cherry tomatoes right off the vine, and boils beets—her favorite vegetable—before tossing them with olive oil and garlic. And her son Carlos really looks forward to curly kale.

Two years ago, a bicycle/car accident left Carlos near death. He recovered from most of his other injuries, but healing from a traumatic brain injury is a long and difficult process. Taking care of her 29-year-old son is Toni's around-the-clock job.

Looking for a way to add fresh vegetables to Carlos's diet after months of medications and hospital food, Toni thought of starting a garden, but hadn't had a plot to call her own since 2005.

So when she heard about Green Corn Project (GCP), a local nonprofit that installs organic food gardens for people in need, she applied immediately and was accepted. GCP's bio-intensive method, which creates beds that need minimal maintenance while producing great yield, was particularly appealing to Toni. According to executive director Amy Crowell, "Toni was a good candidate because she was committed to learning and growing as a gardener with us. At GCP, we don't just build a garden for someone and then go away. We follow up with our gardeners for several seasons."

On a drizzly fall morning in 2006, volunteers from Green Corn Project double dug a 4-by-12-foot bed in the small side yard outside Toni's south Austin apartment. Double digging loosens and aerates the soil to a depth of more than 12 inches and provides a great growing environment for seeds and starter plants. Working with Toni and Carlos, the volunteers also amended the soil with compost before planting fall vegetables. Toni had an impressive harvest, even in a smaller space and a more difficult climate than her native Costa Rica. "The digging makes a big difference," according to Toni. "The garden grows on its own. I don't even have to weed."

There's even more to her new garden, she says, than the flavor and nutritional value of her organic vegetables—and the way sharing her harvest makes her feel part of a larger community.

"Gardening is something spiritual, something healing," she says. Being a full-time caregiver is beyond draining, but Toni rarely complains. And she credits her garden with helping her cope because it gives her so much more than food. It feeds her soul.