

Chilean Corn and Vanishing Species

There are many types of corn out there - I found numerous varieties on a recent trip to Chile - but we usually eat just one or two types

Tuesday, August 23rd, 2011 12:00 PM



By **David Hammond**

A few weeks ago, in Chile's Atacama desert, I was invited to cook pataska, a traditional corn stew, with a group of local families.

It was fascinating to prepare the corn the old fashioned way – by pouring ashes from the fire and some water onto the dried kernels to loosen the husks and render the corn edible – but it was actually more fascinating to see the many varieties of corn available to these rural Chileans. There were red, red and yellow, white and purple, brown, and some jet black varieties, all with different names, uses and subtly different tastes (though I was able to taste just a few).

Fifty years ago, a work entitled “**Races of Maize in Chile**” cataloged 19 different types, or “races,” of corn in Chile.

In downtown Santiago, it was not clear that any more than a handful of these varieties are still available to the general population.

However, in the countryside, these small breeds can still be found, harvested by rural folks whose families have grown this brilliant spectrum of maize for many centuries.

The reason these many kinds of corn do not appear in urban areas may be due to lack of demand, or it may simply be impossible to grow these lesser known varieties in numbers sufficient to supply an urban population (and a very high percentage of Chilenos live in cities – something like 75%).

It is also possible that the corporate supply chain, designed to maximize efficiencies, has determined that these lesser known species of corn are inappropriate for a business model that understandably values consistency and the capability to turn out predictably large quantities of product with generally popular characteristics. Just as many breeds of cows, pigs and chickens are vanishing because they were deemed unsuitable for mass production, so do many vegetables fall out of favor and become unavailable because for one reason or another they do not fit the needs of the industrial farm model of doing business.

This time of year, at the Oak Park Farmers' Market, I always make a stop at the corn stand to pick up some of the golden ears familiar to all of us in the Midwest. I can't help but think, though, that our eating lives would



A few varieties of Chilean corn, courtesy David Hammond

Oak Park Farmers Market

733 N. Ridgeland Ave.

Oak Park IL, 60302

Phone: 708-445-0408

be so much richer if we could find a way to keep less popular or less corporately appropriate species of food alive and reproducing, for the benefit of our table and the continuing evolution of all species, including our own.