



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

12 July 2007

Since Liz started her new job in March I have been spending a lot more time in the car ferrying Sam and Will to and from school and camp. All these hours of driving have impressed upon me the realization that we are not a merging nation.

We love to talk about melting pots and integration and the common good. We get all teary honoring those who sacrificed their lives for us, and love to lecture the rest of the world about the glories of that grand communal undertaking called America. But give your average American driver a chance to get two car lengths further ahead on the highway by cutting across two lanes of traffic and cutting off the vehicles in the exit lane and he will do it.

And why not? A stunt like that can save you well over a second on your drive home. And every second counts. At least, every one of your seconds counts. As for those thirty people in the exit lane jamming on their breaks as you force your way ahead of them, the time they lose doing that is their business. If they don't like losing all that time slowing down for you then they should do whatever it takes to get ahead of everyone else too. That is how it works.

There is something to be said for this method of advancement. A nation of people sticking obdurately to the rules and ensuring that everyone else does likewise—otherwise known as Switzerland—can be a little creepy and stultifying. At least every now and then somebody has to flaunt the rules and dare to do things differently—dangerously even—if only for the sake of reminding people that rules, no matter how good, are never the final word on any topic. That said, there are significant areas in which communal action offers far greater benefits than the individual achievements of a few mavericks.

This spring I had to drive Sam to a soccer game in Amsterdam (do not ask me why the Cambridge Under 12 team had a game in Amsterdam). We drove across 90 from Albany and it took us nearly an hour to get from the Hudson River to Schenectady. Traffic was heavy, but I could see no reason why we were moving at 25 mph. Not, anyway, until we got to the Schenectady exit and discovered cars from all three lanes of the highway attempting at the last second to shove their way onto the two exit lanes. No doubt, even had everyone proceeded in an orderly fashion, the sheer volume of traffic trying to exit would have caused some slowdown (some day someone will have to remind me why Americans show so little enthusiasm for mass transit). But not on this scale. Because some people thought they would gain an advantage by exiting at the last moment, thousands of us wasted fifteen or twenty minutes each—including, of course, the people causing the delay.

I am hard pressed to imagine any moral philosophy or theory of governance that would consider this state of affairs to have enhanced anybody's wellbeing. No doubt, the oil industry applauds this sort of behavior. The rest of us should feel embarrassed and irritated.

When we take our private cars out onto public roads we face the basic problem of civic life: finding a way for people in pursuit of individual goals in a common space to coexist without harming or unnecessarily impeding one another. If we all drive according to some central plan we may achieve a kind of orderliness on the roads, but most of us will not get where we want to go. If we all drive as we please, we may achieve a kind of liberty, we won't get anywhere at all. The answer, as always, lies somewhere between. So we have lanes and lights and licenses and the right to choose our route. But within that rough compromise we still have each of us to decide on some balance between getting home as fast as possible, damn the rest, and civil cooperation—between getting along and getting along.

Out on the highway we seem to tilt rather towards the former, hardly surprising in a country

This week's share: Chinese cabbage, Black currants, Escarole or radicchio, Garlic, Lettuce, Snap peas, Scallions, Squash, Basil, Lovage

so keen on allowing the individual to get ahead. And we like to think that this drive to surpass makes us great. But sometimes it just makes us late. We will all fall behind if we cannot learn to merge.

And if you think your commute is in trouble, just wait until you see what happens if we cannot be bothered to accommodate our energy desires to the world's interests. Perhaps the constant barrage of severe thunderstorms this summer is mere coincidence, but try thinking of it as a little taste of what is to come. Floods and hail and wind may not seem like too great a price to pay for air conditioning (especially when the weather is so miserable). But wait until you see what price you have to pay for your food once farming has become untenable.

The good news is that summer squash and zucchini will probably still be abundant no matter what becomes of the climate. Certainly this summer's weather has not deterred them, as you may notice when you look in your bag. Maybe someone will find a way to turn them into biofuel and we will run the whole planet on squash. In the meantime, you could grill these and dress them with a little lemon juice, crushed garlic, basil and salt. Grilled squash is also excellent cold.

While we are on the topic of excessive warming, try to spare your snap peas that fate. They need only a couple of minutes of steaming at most. We eat a lot of them raw, especially Greg, who can do more damage to a pea patch than a herd of deer.

I like Chinese cabbage raw too. Chop it finely and mix it with scallions, olive oil, vinegar, soy sauce, a few drops of sesame oil, a spoonful of good mustard, perhaps a little hot pepper and some minced lovage, which has a celery-like flavor (they are relatives) and is high in quercetin—exciting news, no doubt, for anyone who has the vaguest idea what that is.

Discovering that you have black currants in your share is, I trust, exciting news for those of you have the vaguest idea what they are. And I hope those of you have never met them before enjoy the introduction. But you will probably find them a little off-putting if you try them raw. Unlike most berries, they are significantly better cooked—and, in my opinion, significantly better cooked than most berries. You could just put them in a saucepan with a little water and half a cup of sugar and cook them until they are soft and serve them (as they are or strained) over cake or ice cream (or cake and ice cream). You could put a few cooked berries in the bottom of a crème brûlée or mix them into muffin batter. Or you could cook them down slowly with red wine, chicken stock, vinegar, garlic, bay leaves, cloves and black pepper, pass the mixture through a fine sieve and have a sauce for beef or venison or game birds.

Discovering that so many of you would come to the farm this past Sunday was exciting news for us. We like to show our members what we have been working on so it is nice to have you visit and tour the fields. But we are not kidding ourselves. We know you really came for the doughnuts.