

These seeds grow culture, community and food



Volunteers Peg Kavesh, of Mendon; Susan Roth, of South Bristol, who is bending over for an onion in a box near the sink; Alicia Van Buren, of Canandaigua; and Deb Guard, of Geneva, chop and prep vegetables for cooking. They are helping with making lunch for about 100 people who will help husk Tuscarora White Corn by hand for the Ganondagan White Corn Project. PHOTOS BY TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Ganondagan preserves age-old planting traditions

Tina MacIntyre-Yee

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

The only sound was the rustling of husks, carefully pulled down to save the three strongest for braiding the corn together.

This wasn't just any corn.

It was Haudenosaunee White Corn, the seeds passed down from generation to generation and its handling adhered to age-old traditions from planting to processing.

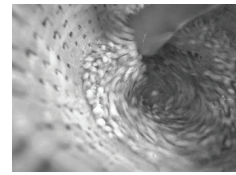
See **CORN**, Page 11A



Fort Hill at Ganondagan State Historical Site was once where the Seneca stored corn and other grains for the Haudenosaunee Confederacy during the 1600s. The French came and burned it as well as other crops in 1687. This area, the granary, once had wood posts around it; today it has historical markers telling what happened.



Deb McPherson, of Fairport; Robin Wall Kimmerer, of Fabius; and Andrea Cooke, of Salamanca, pose for a photo with the corn that Wall Kimmerer just braided with help from her cousin McPherson at the husking bee for the Ganondagan White Corn Project. Cooke, who is Onondaga, taught the women, who are Potawatomi, how to braid the corn. Wall Kimmerer wrote a national bestseller, "Braiding Sweetgrass Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants," which Cooke said makes the connection between science and what Indigenous people and Haudenosaunee ancestors knew about growing the corn. PHOTOS BY TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



The Haudenosaunee white corn, after being dried, has to be cleaned. Traditionally, it is boiled with hardwood ash and rinsed in a corn basket made by hand from wood splints to get rid of some of the shell.

brought it to Ganondagan and restarted it.

"The idea is to get our own people to eat our own food," Jimerson said, and not just for special occasions.

Keeping tradition alive for future generations

Today, one of the challenges is to make sure the corn isn't genetically modified or patented. Indigenous farmers are careful to plant at times that it won't cross pollinate with other corn in the fields. All the seeds remain with the Indigenous community.

By midmorning, the barn at Ganondagan White Corn Project was a hum of activity. People chatted with those beside them. Some were first-timers, others had come before. Music, drumming and singing from an Indigenous social dance song, streamed from a phone and two young boys climbed up a corn pile, searching for corn silk to collect for use in medicine.

As people worked, they were asked to have what Haudenosaunee people call a "good mind," which means to have respect and be mindful of your actions and thoughts.

Deb McPherson of Fairport attended for the first time with her cousin. Both are Potawatomi and came to support Ganondagan. McPherson noted that many of the Indigenous people have a connection to the same foods and have similar stories around it.

"It was almost like a replica of what was happening in the Long House, long ago," McPherson said of the activity surrounding her.

"Just think how many people have touched that corn and when they're getting braided, it's everyone's corn."

It wasn't just the corn she husked, she said. A basket she contributed to had corn husked by others the communal spirit is still there as they are braided together.

"They are hanging as a community as well."



Brothers Kiru and Mayu Betchart, of Rochester, stand on top of the corn looking for corn silk. Every part of the corn is used. The silk from the corn is used as medicine. As people worked, they were asked to have what Haudenosaunee people call a "good mind," which means to respect and be mindful of your actions and thoughts.

Nellie Cooke, Onondaga, who lives south of Syracuse on the Onondaga Nation, laughs as her daughter, Carolyn Hill, makes faces between the braided corn cobs. Cooke had come with her mother, Andrea Cooke, of Salamanca, on the Allegany Reservation to help braid the corn for Ganondagan.



Corn

Continued from Page 3A

The batch was received three days prior and needed to be husked and braided, then hung to dry to prevent mold. After several months, the corn will be hand-sorted, cleaned, and bagged as hulled corn, roasted corn flour and corn flour.

"Corn is so essential to who we are. It's what fed us," said Peter Jimerson, former site director of Ganondagan State Historic Site, who retired in February.

The struggle of the Haudenosaunee White Corn

The Haudenosaunee White Corn Project is in its 23rd year at the Ganondagan State Historic Site in Victor. The site has historical significance to the project.

In the 1600s, Ganondagan was the largest Seneca village and neighbored Fort Hill where the Haudenosaunee Confederacy stored grain. Any nation within that confederacy could access the food as needed.

However, in 1687 a French army came from Canada to attack the village as part of an effort to secure trade in the area. The Seneca knew of the attack in advance and left. The army chopped down crops and burned the stored corn at Fort Hill in hopes of starving the Seneca should they return.

This corn, a descendant of the ancient seeds, survived.

"The corn was definitely hiding to stay safe," Angel Jimerson, consultant and former production manager at Ganondagan White Corn Project said.

The struggle to save the corn did not end there. When boarding schools later arrived, part of the mission was to quash the customs, language and tradition of the Haudenosaunee, Jimerson said. People had to hide their practices, languages, songs and foods.

Haudenosaunee believe corn isn't just a crop. It's a part of the Three Sisters, which also includes beans and squash. Besides being the agricultural staples, Haudenosaunee legend says people need to acknowledge the Three Sisters as relatives and include them in ceremonies.

Jimerson said their great grandfather was one of the few in the Cattaraugus Reservation who secretly kept growing corn in his small garden. He grew just enough so it could be processed, eaten and have some left to replant.

The continuation of the White Corn Project

Originally called the Iroquois White Corn Project, founders, John Mohawk and his wife, Yvonne Dion-Buffalo, wanted to introduce ancestral seeds and foods back into the Haudenosaunee diet on the Cattaraugus Reservation. Corn is the most labor intensive crop of the Three Sisters, so processing the corn and making it more available was important to the culture and health of the community.

When the couple died in the early 2000s, the project was dormant for years until Jimerson, a cousin of John Mohawk,



Gerry Fisher, acting director at Seneca Nation's Gakwi:yoh Farms, laughs at a comment as she tosses corn to be husked to the other end of the circle. "To me, without our corn, we'd be lost, our foods would be lost," she said.



Aimee Carpenter, of Greece, Seneca, who is program assistant for the Friends of Ganondagan, shows corn that has three and four ears growing with the main one. It was told to Friends of Ganondagan by visitors from Guatemala, who see corn as important to their culture and wanting to keep this ancestral food alive, that three of four corn cobs that are growing together are considered sacred and shouldn't be cooked but be brought to the field when they are planting. That should bring about a good harvest, they say.