

Museum of Vancouver exhibit exalts the joys of local food

Byline:

Tara Lee

Body:

In a photograph of the Davie Village Community Garden, busker Vince Grausso stands on the grey concrete of Davie Street, playing his flute in the direction of the lush green vegetable plots in front of him. "To me, it was like he was bringing that garden into blossom with his music. It was so poetic and beautiful," recalls photographer Brian Harris. When he took the image, Harris was also struck by the divide between the city and agriculture, which he hopes to bridge with his photography.

Harris's pictures are on display at the Museum of Vancouver as part of the exhibit Home Grown: Local Sustainable Food, which opens Thursday (August 26) and runs until January 2, 2011. In partnership with FarmFolk/CityFolk, the MOV is showcasing 39 of Harris's images in a vibrant and joyous celebration of back-yard farming and local food.

The exhibit is a continuation of what Harris calls "social-engagement photography", which began when Harris spent 20 years shooting photos in the Himalayas in order to raise money for an NGO that helps the visually impaired. Three years ago, after the project ended, he approached FarmFolk/CityFolk about taking photos for its calendars and notecards.

Since then, Harris has visited sustainable farms and back-yard plots all around B.C., and has developed a body of work that he feels has a compelling message for viewers. "This show's purpose is to help people understand why it's so important to eat food that's grown locally, for all the environmental and social reasons," he says. "It's about trying to sustain our society and sustain our bodies."

As he walks contemplatively through the exhibit, Harris explains the structure of Home Grown. The photographs guide visitors through the unfolding of the life cycle, beginning with the happy awakening of spring, moving to the vitality of summer, transitioning to the decay of autumn, and ending with the dormancy of winter. Each season is associated with a compass direction and a colour traditional to many First Nations people (for example, spring is a bold red, with the sun rising in the east).

Harris lists off the effects that he hopes his photographs will have on exhibitgoers: "Pleasure. Understanding. Consideration. Delight. Questioning." Issue panels are positioned throughout, informing viewers about concepts like food miles, seed saving, and cooperative farming. Mind maps, with trigger phrases associated with each season, encourage visitors to write down their own memories and post them on a sharing wall. For example, autumn's mind map lists "harvest time", "giving thanks", and "November rains". And quotes appear above the images in order to get visitors thinking about the larger significance of a renewed intimacy with agriculture, such as this from ecologist Aldo Leopold: "We regard land as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

However, it is the images themselves that are the most persuasive. In one, journalist and beekeeper Allen Garr stands on the roof of the Vancouver Convention Centre in a white, astronaut-like protective suit as he tends to his 60,000 bees. In another, children at China Creek Community Garden bend over their shovels as they cheerfully labour in their collective garden plot. And in one of Harris's favourites, a man

stands proudly by a thriving back-yard garden at Sophia Street and East 32nd Avenue. He and seven neighbours help 93-year-old Irving Wilson tend to the vegetables that he's been growing there since the 1930s.

“What Brian is doing is extremely important. He's showing to urban dwellers that they can have better food, that they can grow their own food, and that there are people out there doing it,” says Richmond city councillor Harold Steves. A fourth-generation farmer, Steves co-owns Steveston Stock and Seed Farm and is a passionate advocate for local agriculture. In the exhibit, there's a sunny shot of the purebred Belted Galloway cattle that he raises to sell as meat and for breeding purposes.

In a phone interview, Steves talks about his worries that urban development is increasingly encroaching on farmland, and that society has become accustomed to an industrialized, monocultural, nonlocal food system. He realizes that Home Grown viewers may not become farmers, but says they can still make a difference by shopping at farmers markets, buying directly from farmers, and growing food in their own back yards.

Visitors can get started by taking the seed packages provided in a wheelbarrow at the end of the exhibit, and by attending the food talks and family workshops. (For a schedule, see the [Museum of Vancouver's Web site](#) [1].) If they're already active consumers of all things local, they can contribute jars of preserves (maximum height 28 centimetres) at the museum's front desk to be added to the wall of preserves display.

The exhibit's final image of a ladybug on a stalk of winter rye says it all: even the smallest of contributions matters in fostering our local food system.

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