

tasweekend

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The
Harvest
Issue

DOWN
TO
EARTH

MEET THE GOURMET
FARMER'S FARMER NADIA
DANTI WHO TOTALLY
DIGS OUR DIRT

FOOD HOBART'S CBD TREASURE TRAVEL CRUISESHIP DELIGHT ART THE WEIRD WORLD OF MICHAEL VALE

It's only natural

A passion for lush soil, wriggling worms, green shoots and the outdoors makes Nadia Danti the Gourmet Farmer's farmer



WORDS & MAIN PORTRAIT **TRACY RENKIN**

Nadia Danti is happiest when she's cupping a handful of warm, worm goo. She's showing off the incredible organic market garden she's in charge of at Fat Pig Farm in Glaziers Bay near Cygnet. Everything here is done by hand, the old-fashioned way. There are no sprays or pesticides or fancy gardening gizmos – just a few simple hand tools wielded by a bright young woman with a head full of gardening know-how and rocking some well-washed King Gees.

Like a loving mother, she's checking the health of each of her plants and looking at the soil moisture to make sure everything is tickety-boo. We've just walked past her flock of chickens milling around under the annual beds. They are nutrient recycling she says, scratching up the soil and munching on the scraps and – she points out – “shitting everywhere, which is really awesome”.

Her Blundstone boots stop abruptly as she excitedly bobs down in front of the worm farm buried under some unremarkable shiny, black plastic. “See all the worms,” she gushes as the wriggly critters dance around her dirty fingernails. “I love them so much. They are just so amazing. These worms and all the bac-

teria and fungi and organisms that are in here are doing all the incredibly hard work of converting all those scraps we've put in there, into this lush, lush soil food. Worm casting for me is like the holy grail of fertility.”

It still feels “dreamy”, Danti says, to walk around the 70 fruit and vegetable patches spread across the stunning half-acre patch of this 28ha farm that faces onto the South West wilderness. She's only been in this job for two years after learning all about market gardening – and the intense planning that comes with it – from hanging out with the “best kind of farmers” mostly in NSW and then later overseas. Her mentors Kirsty Wilkinson and Fraser Bayley from



Old Mill Road in Turlinjah on the south coast of NSW are the pioneers of market garden farming.

Danti is a firm believer in yearly crop rotation to prevent disease build-up and nutrient depletion, and regular seaweed and comfrey brews and composting to enhance the soil and minimal tilling to protect the little guys doing all the hard work under the soil.

She's only got a few more weeks to get her winter crops in the ground or they won't be strong enough by the time the early frosts hit the Huon. But when *Tasweekend* visits it's the peak of summer harvest and glancing around at the abundant crops on offer it's obvious this mother of nature knows exactly what she's doing.

It seems like everything is ready to be plucked or picked: the vines are bursting with odd-shaped zucchini and cucumbers and plump tomatoes and eggplants, and brightly coloured capsicums and chilli. But there's a whole heap of under-the-ground goodies ready too: beetroots, carrots, radish, turnips and a suite of sweet fruits such as real-tasting strawberries, rhubarb, apples and pears.

As soon as she harvests, Danti piles it all into the yellow ute and drives the old girl a few hundred metres up the dirt track to deliver her produce to the Fat Pig Farm kitchen where Gourmet



Fat Pig Farm gardener Nadia Danti, above and left picking broad beans, provides vegies for Gourmet Farmer Matthew Evans and his team. Pictures: TRACY RENKIN

Farmer Matthew Evans and his team of chefs and kitchen staff transform them into delicious dishes for their on-site Friday feasts. The produce she grows makes between 40 and 120 lunches every week. Sometimes she worries if she'll have enough to go around but there's always an abundance of delicious, pickled and preserved fruits and vegetables for the leaner times.

"Things store better in the ground than they do in the fridge," says Evans, who designs his weekly menus based on what Danti delivers to his door — sometimes just an hour before the feast starts. The Gourmet Farmer is all about creating dishes that taste like the season you are living in and the soil you are standing on. And this SBS foodie television star and former food critic is the first to admit that until recently he knew very little about what was happening under the sandy loam his produce comes from. When he hired Danti to grow his vegetables, he says, he had no idea just how clever she was.

"We knew bits and pieces about things, but she is so much more across everything that's going on under the ground," he says. "She's growing vegetables, right. It's not rocket science. It's way more complicated. She's dealing with the ecosystem under

the soil, the ecosystem in the soil, the ecosystem above the soil and the weather, which is so complicated. She does all of that and then shares the gifts of that knowledge and produce with us."

There are billions of busy microorganisms working together in just one teaspoon of soil and Danti understands what they all get up to in their underground world, and knows why their work is so vital to great-tasting, nutritional, good, clean food.

"It's the topsoil where all the magic happens," Danti says.

That's why she's right into minimal tilling — only a few centimetres down — because a deep till, she says, is like an earthquake for these little guys. She says tilling would destroy all the great work the worms do, like the special drainage and air channels they create to transport food down from the topsoil so that the bacteria and fungi can gobble them up and then change the soil structure and water retention of the soil.

Plants do not just eat soil, she says, they build a relationship underground with all these organisms: like bacteria and fungi, nematodes and protozoa and earthworms and they find the nutrients in the soil and the organic material from above, which they then transform into a product plants can absorb.



Above: Gourmet Farmer Matthew Evans with partner, Sadie, holding some of the fresh produce from their farmer's garden and, left, some Japanese turnips harvested and ready to be prepared for lunch. Pictures: LUKE BOWDEN



Evans says mass produced vegetables have half the micro nutrients these days than they did 80 years ago. He says that when the ecosystem under the ground is working at its best, the plants get the biggest hit of nutrients possible and that translates into delicious-tasting produce.

The luxury of harvesting them at the very last minute is just an added bonus. If they are serving corn in a dish at Fat Pig Farm, they boil up the water in the kitchen so that it's bubbling away just as Danti arrives with the cobs piled up in her arms.

"It tastes so much better," says Evans. "Nadia understands that all the effort she puts into creating great soil translates into the wonderful flavour of the vegetables. All those micronutrients the plants harness end up as intense flavour."

Danti's strolling through her flowering herb plot with a lovely mix of pretty flowers that are swaying in the breeze. She can hear the buzzing bees going crazy for the thyme blooms, but there are stacks of other winged creatures flapping their tiny wings as well — so many it blows her away, she says. This pretty spot is by far her favourite part of the market garden sprawl. All of a sudden she stops. She's about to play her weekly game of eye spy. She's documenting exactly what insects she can see. "The diversity is so phenomenal," Danti says. "Every week I see a new insect that I haven't seen before. There is this whole world of other insects — native bees and flies and moths and butterflies and beetles and bugs — they are all equally as important."

That's why the garden has around 30 types of vegetables as well as a fruit and nut forest mixed in with lots of herbs and flowers, because when you are growing a diversity of plants, it means you attract a diversity of insects so they are keeping each other's populations in check rather than one dominating.

"You are always going to have pests in your garden, but it's how you manage it — and diversity is one tool, and growing flowers and herbs to attract different insects is another — because we want insects in the garden," she says. "We have to look out for these little guys because they've all got a role to play."

After eye spy, she bends down to scoop up a bunch of carrots. They are smaller than the bagged ones at the supermarket and not as perfect looking. She washes off the dirt with a spray of water and passes one over. We bite into the carrot at the same time, and I'm instantly six again. I'm with my big sister while our little sister snoozes and we've snuck into the vegie plot. The mouthful of carrot tastes exactly the same. I share the memory with Danti. "It's amazing," she says. "Once you start growing food yourself, you can never go back to shop-bought."

If you want to get your vegetable garden cranking, you can book into the two-day Goodlife Permaculture's course at Fat Pig Farm on the weekend of March 23 and 24. As well as learning from expert market gardeners such as Nadia, the good folk at the farm feed you all weekend. @goodlife_permaculture @fat_pig_farm The fifth season of Gourmet Farmer is currently being filmed and will air later in the year on the SBS Food channel