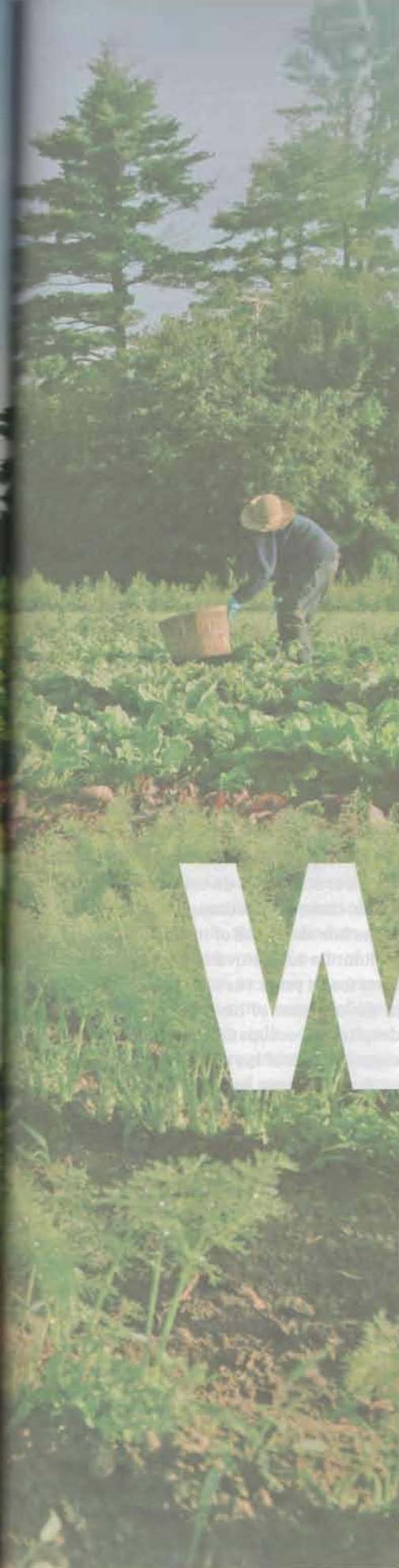


# GHOSTS

## IN THE FIELDS

On Nesenkeag Farm in Litchfield, unusual Asian vegetables — like Japanese eggplant and Chinese water spinach — are grown. The Cambodian people who work the farm say the plants are not the only things that inhabit the fields. There are spirits, too. *Story by Meg Cadoux Hirshberg*

*Photos by Bobby Neel Adams*



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With his weathered hand, farmer Eero Ruuttila points to a distant field. One of his workers, Sok Ly, bolted from there four years ago, terrified by a ghost. Today, lush rows of peas ripple in the September breeze, green and innocent of spectral visits.

It's Thursday, the main harvest day at Nesenkeag Farm in Litchfield. Before 11 a.m. Friday morning, sous chefs at 18 of Boston's finest restaurants will receive, uncrate and admire organically grown mesclun, braising greens, daikon radish, bok choy, Thai basil, Japanese eggplant, Chinese water spinach, arugula, radicchio, cilantro and delicata squash. Eero Ruuttila is considered a top-of-the-line vegetable



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grower, and the chefs pay accordingly.

Ruuttila's field hands are all Cambodian immigrants. They pick, sort, haul, wash and pack produce. They all drive 20 minutes north on Route 3A from Lowell, Mass., which harbors America's second largest Cambodian population, around 30,000 people. Ruuttila has always hired Cambodians to toil in his fields: "They know how to put vegetables in a box without destroying them. They can harvest ten times what a local high school kid can. They're fast, reliable and conscientious. I make money because of them."

The ties that bind Ruuttila to his Cambodian laborers are a mesh of practical and personal. He has long had an interest in Southeast Asian culture, and studied regional history and religion while on a college exchange program in Thailand in



Above: Tomatoes are sorted in the fields.

the early '70s. "After all the Cambodians suffered during and after the Vietnam war," he says. "I feel good helping them honor their culture through the unusual Asian vegetables we grow."

Challenged by capricious weather, omnivorous insects, fluctuating crop prices, broken machinery and relentless weeds, Ruuttila relies on his workers' experience as former market gardeners in their native land. But he also copes with, and is intrigued by, the mystical world his workers inhabit. Though careful and efficient, they are, literally, easily spooked. "They see crocodiles in the river and monkeys in the trees, and cobras and spirits in the fields, so what's rational and irrational?" Ruuttila asks. "In any management situation, you've got to tune in to the psychology of your work force — or you lose money." To make a living, this farmer must somehow reconcile magical and agricultural realms.

On Nesenkeag Farm, crickets call, butterflies dart, machinery drones and plants rustle in the breeze. Freed from our culturally bred and reinforced definitions of reality, we too might imagine spirits everywhere. Sok Ly did return to the ghostly field, but would work there only in the company of other women.

Last year, Khao, another field hand, who'd said he didn't believe in ghosts, gunned Ruuttila's ailing tractor from a distant field and raced back to the barn. Fear conquered shame. Something had followed him in the field, he nervously insisted to Ruuttila. Khao had been knocking down rye heavy with pollen. The cloud of pollen, swirling about in the tractor's wake, formed a convincing apparition. Ruuttila hopped on the tractor, knocked down more rye and recreated this *trompe l'oeil*. But Khao still would not return to the field.

Ghosts roam off-farm too. The field hands lunched around the farm picnic table on a beautiful afternoon late last fall and plotted an alternate route back to Lowell. A fatal accident on Route 3A had left a spirit behind. It had become a taboo stretch of road. "They believe that when there's a violent death, the spirit remains around the body and can inhabit you if you go near," Ruuttila says.

Ruuttila keeps running up against the fears and superstitions of his workers. Five years ago, a field hand named Bun Ny cast a black magic spell to harm a couple also working at the farm. They'd offended Bun Ny by quitting his carpool,

costing him the small fee he'd collected for that service. Another worker told Ruuttila that Bun Ny had threatened to cast a spell on the entire crew. "It was one of those threshold type situations," says Ruuttila. "It was a \$3,000 harvest day and the whole crew was terrified."

Ruuttila's confrontation with Bun Ny lasted a half hour. Everyone watched it. Going on gut, and clueless about the forces he was dealing with, Ruuttila knew only that he had to undermine Bun Ny's power. Ruuttila recalls: "I told him: 'This is America. You can't pull this shit here.' I was thinking: I have to save my work force. After a while, Bun Ny sank to his knees and begged for his life. I fired him. It was one of the heaviest things that's ever happened on the farm."

Nesenkeag is New Hampshire's largest organic farm. Its fields undulate downhill from busy Route 3A to the Merrimack River. Henry David Thoreau paddled through this valley in south-central New Hampshire in 1839. He describes it in "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers": "We read in the *Gazetteer* ... that 'The first house in this town [Litchfield] was erected on the margin of the [Merrimack] river soon after 1665 for a house of traffic with the Indians. For some time one Cromwell carried on a lucrative trade with them, weighing their furs with his foot ...'" The river still draws diverse peoples to its banks, these days because crops grow well in the fine sandy soil of its flood plain.

Ruuttila has cultivated these fertile 40 acres for 14 years. His Finnish lineage lives in the paleness of his face, sun-resistant despite his occupation and location 20 degrees south of his ancestral home. Even with ample gray hair pushing out from under his baseball cap, Ruuttila at 50 looks young and farmer-strong. Like one of the farm's ghosts, Ruuttila seems everywhere at once — plowing a distant field on the rumbling tractor, explaining harvest tasks to the field hands ("beans, flat, not round, we pick") over whining mechanical lettuce spinners, weeding, seeding, checking the answering machine for customer orders. His stride is purposeful but easily broken by a visitor or a neighbor in need.

The farm crew is skimpy today at only four women, down from six last week. They are middle-aged, squat and solid. Broad straw hats protect their nut-brown wizened faces from the sun. A moving collage of mismatched colors and fabrics, they pile into a truck laden with harvest



baskets. Several layers protect them from an unseasonably cold fall morning, field mud and the frigid vegetable wash basins.

Every one of Ruuttila's workers suffered unspeakable losses during Khmer Rouge rule from 1975 to early 1979; one in six Cambodians died then from starvation, overwork in labor camps or murder. With the trust that grows from shared time and labor, the English speakers in Ruuttila's crew hesitantly tell their agonizing stories. Ruuttila says, "We can't fathom the depth of suffering that these people have experienced. What's unique is that there's never been any justice. It's unresolved. There are leaders in the Cambodian government today who were part of the Khmer Rouge. There were no war crimes trials. And Lowell is a microcosm of Cambodia. People don't talk, even there, because their kids are probably going to school with children of people who murdered their relatives. They are still frightened of reprisals, and have deep-seated resentments and fears."

Along with lingering fear and hatred, ancient clan disputes also made the journey from Cambodia. Members of two clans work at the farm, and they have imported their ongoing conflicts. Ruuttila gets exasperated: "It drives me up the wall, and it's irresolvable. Their culture frowns on direct confrontation, and people are always whispering to me about others. Once I cried in front of them. I told them this is my life and I don't want to work here if you guys are going to fight all the time."

Though these cultural collisions often frustrate Ruuttila, he finds them intriguing, sometimes charming, and always

interesting. Cambodian Buddhist monks have blessed his fields. He has danced at Cambodian weddings and sipped their exotic drinks made from basil seeds or coconut. Four years ago, a hurricane threatened New Hampshire, and Ruuttila asked one of the women what she did in Cambodia when typhoons approached. She replied that the villagers fired rifles and cannons into the angry clouds to divert their fury. "I ran into my office, grabbed my shotgun, and aimed at the wind-driven clouds. After I'd fired one shot, the woman ran up to me and whispered, 'You have to say which way you want the storm to go.' 'OK, hook east and go out to sea!' I shouted, and I fired a second shot. That night, the storm hooked east."

Ruuttila's attentiveness to his workers has helped his business. Asians prize pea shoots with tendrils more than peas themselves. Several years ago, Eero watched his workers eat pea tendrils at lunch. So he harvested the tips of field peas he'd planted as an overwintering cover crop. Last year, he sold \$16,000 worth of pea tips. "I've learned you can make money from a crop before maturity, and at the same time encourage flowering and vegetative growth, so you have a better crop in the end. They taught me that."

Ruuttila is mindful of his workers in other ways, too. He has built an informal shrine between two sheds in the vegetable wash area. Command central for the farm, the wash area is where workers wash, process, crate and cool vegetables. The shrine is not conspicuous, and the women, gently washing the field heat from newly picked greens, pay no obvious attention.

*A moving collage of mismatched colors and fabrics, they pile into a truck laden with harvest baskets.*

The shrine is almost lost amidst the usual farm debris: a backpack sprayer, an open bag of dry cat food, pruning shears, duct tape, produce boxes, bushel baskets, scales, aluminum wash bins and an old Parcheesi game.

Ruuttila has tacked up a poem to the shrine wall. Written in Khmer, the poem is translated from the Navajo. It contains cryptic suggestions to become one with pollen, and a reminder to "enjoy the trail." A sentence scribbled below the poem says that it is "a magic formula to make an enemy peaceful." Next to the Navajo poem, Ruuttila has posted an aerial photo of Angkor Wat, the sacred ancient temple in Cambodia, along with a colorful drawing of what he calls "the Green Goddess Buddha." Vines adorn her head; flowers erupt from her hands.

"To me it represents earth power, the power of living, growing things," Ruuttila says. He also has posted a laminated newspaper picture of hundreds of skulls, captioned, "The skulls of Cambodians allegedly executed during the brutal reign of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge lie in a temple in Cheong Ek."

A smooth, dark, flat rock rests on a shelf Ruuttila has nailed up in the shrine. On the rock lies a diverse and whimsical collection: a small Buddha, a plastic bust of an Indian chief, a shallow cup of rainwater, a hardened tree mushroom, the skull of a small animal, some ripe bananas and a



**Above:** A field worker creates an arrangement as colorful as her clothing. It will bedeck the shrine.

**Center:** The shrine, nestled between two sheds, represents the workers' Cambodian culture.



vase of sunflowers. Tall, deep purple cosmos, exquisitely framed by the sky and trees, leap out from a Quikava mug.

Shrine maintenance is communal. "The women do the flowers and sometimes add vegetables," Ruuttila says. "I light incense here every morning, as a way to start the work day. The shrine has a calming effect when there's morning mist, because they think ghosts live in fog. We don't meditate or pray here. It's just part of the culture of the farm."

One woman, Pang Orn, placed the bananas in the shrine to bring good luck when she gambles later this week. Will she leave the bananas until they rot? "I don't know," laughs Ruuttila. "It's the mystery of the week." The following Friday night, the banana offering ripened into a \$200 profit at Foxwoods casino.

One week later, Ruuttila stands at a microphone, waiting for the crowd to quiet down. Seventy people pack the small Sugar Shack café, near the University of Massachusetts, Lowell campus. This good-natured, caffeinated, sometimes boisterous crowd has been listening all afternoon to poetry and prose accompanied by live jazz. It's the thirteenth annual Jack Kerouac festival, a four-day celebration of Lowell's famous native son.

A flute plays softly. Ruuttila, the fifteenth of 30 speakers, recites some of his poetry. His verses ruminate on the pulsing life of the farm, and reach back to his earlier work as a brick cleaner in Boston. Today his 8-year-old son Jesse and wife Liana are in the audience.

Because he's in Lowell, home to his work force, Ruuttila closes with a story about one of his Cambodian field hands. Last year, in what became a macabre reprise of "what did you do on your summer vacation," Ruuttila asked Mao

(not his real name), a Cambodian field hand, what he'd done over the winter. Farmwork savings in hand, Mao had returned to Cambodia and, for \$100, hired two gunmen with automatic rifles. They'd trudged through the forest for three days, to a remote village. Haunted by a memory, Mao was set to kill.

In 1975, the Khmer Rouge emptied Phnom Penh and forced everyone into labor camps. Mao had told Ruuttila about the evacuation and its eerie, tragic aftermath. Banned paper money blew around in empty streets. By decree, only barter was legal. Everyone was forced to farm, and without fertilizer or tools, only hands.

Mao's intended victim had been a labor camp guard. Twenty-five years ago, this guard kicked Mao for refusing to plant rice in a shallowly buried human rib cage, a bony indictment jutting from one of Cambodia's infamous killing fields.

The crowd sits silently. The flute whispers with the vision of human beings composting into fertilizer, a hellish counterpoint to the gentle fertility of Ruuttila's organic earth. Ruuttila grapples with his workers' once expendable lives, worth only their weight in elements. He reaches for an agricultural metaphor, and calls Mao's story "The Nitrogen Cycle."

Finishing the story, Ruuttila's voice trembles. His face turns ashen. He looks inhabited by his workers' ghosts. The next speaker approaches the mike. Ruuttila seems exhausted as he pays for coffee and heads back to the farm.

There's no point in plotting an alternate route. He ventured too near a scene of violent death today, as he has many times before. Spirits invaded long ago. In Eero Ruuttila's truck, ghosts ride shotgun. **NH**

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