

Our Earthly Pleasures

Alicia Bay Laurel tells us how to live on the Earth

Alicia Bay Laurel has been called the Martha Stewart of the hippies. Her book *Living on the Earth* was once described as a paean to the back-to-the-land movement pioneered by Emerson and Thoreau. The book created a revolution, empowering urban and suburban youth with tools, skills and knowledge to pursue a simpler, more natural and handmade life. As the *New York Times Book Review* put it in 1971:

"Pleasure's the whole point of course, the pleasures of working with the free and rich resources of the planet in order not only to survive, but to live like kings and queens of the cosmos, richer than Rockefeller often on the per-capita income of Indians on the reservation. In my interview with her, Alicia Bay Laurel reflects on the book's inspirations and the movement's legacy."

Living on the Earth is, in your own words, a collection of "celebrations, storm warnings, formulas, recipes, rumors and country dances" not written but "harvested ... for people who would rather chop wood than work behind a desk." You assembled the handwritten and beautifully illustrated manual while living on a California commune called Wheeler Ranch. What was life like on Wheeler Ranch? You were 19, it was 1967 ...

Bill Wheeler was in his 30s then, painting large oil canvases in his homebuilt house of home-hewn lumber. He owned 350 acres of wooded land that had recently seen a forest fire. He invited the ousted community members of Morningstar Ranch to come and live on his land after the county had begun harassing them. When I arrived, about 100



people lived on Bill's land, in small homebuilt houses made mostly of recycled materials. Some people planted their own vegetable gardens next to their houses, and Bill had also tilled a large community garden, where I was fond of working. We all brought in some of our food from the local co-op—

grains, beans, peanut butter—but garden produce and fruit picked from the orchards at Morningstar formed a large part of our diets. We gathered water in glass jugs from a spring. There were no expressed rules of behavior on Wheeler Ranch, but, for the most part, people were respectful of one another. Sundays always occasioned community potluck meals followed by community music, and, in the winter, preceded by a sweat lodge in a dome made of bent saplings, army blankets and plastic sheets, with straw on the floor and a rock-lined pit in the center. I found the sweat lodge experience ecstatic.

In a radio interview you reveal that you first heard about Wheeler Ranch at one of Stephen Gaskin's legendary Monday Night Classes. On page 108 in *Living on the Earth*, you quote him: "Find a little bit of land somewhere and plant a carrot seed. Now sit down and watch it grow. When it is fully grown pull it up and eat it." Gaskin went on to create The Farm in Tennessee, which would become the most successful and influential hippie commune in America. I'd love to hear your thoughts about Gaskin and his lectures.

Stephen Gaskin taught semantics at San Francisco State College before he became a freelance lecturer on metaphysics. He also was a devout student of Zen Master Suzuki Roshi. He paid the rent by working at the post

Text by Lisa Rovner
Images from *Living on the Earth* by Alicia Bay Laurel



office. Stephen Gaskin created a community by giving these lectures. At its height, there were 3,000 people attending the Monday Night Class at Playland at the Beach in San Francisco. When a transcript of some of the talks became his first book, *The Monday Night Class*, he galvanized the community by doing his cross-country book tour from a rolling home in a school bus, followed by a caravan of similar conveyances. When they all returned to San Francisco, they were ready to live together, held a meeting to decide where to go and purchased the land near Summertown, Tennessee. The work ethic and worldwide service orientation of the community made it deservedly famous, along with its natural childbirth clinic and books, food products, cookbook, eco-village training center and alternative assisted living facility, Rosinante (named after Don Quixote's old horse).

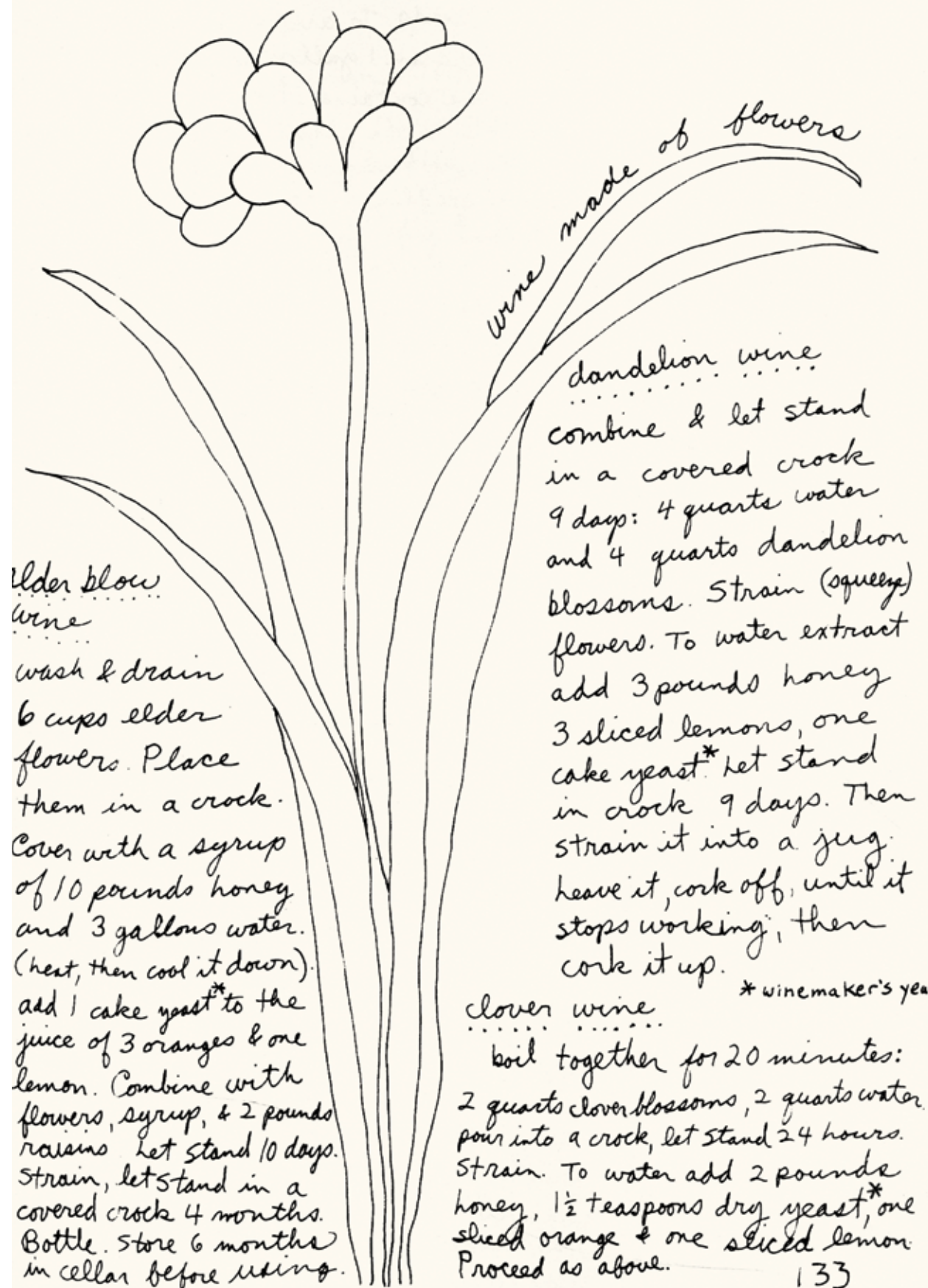
In 1971 when "Living on the Earth" was first published, it was reviewed by the "Whole Earth Catalog," a publication that offered information on how to live life more naturally. Here's what they wrote about your book: "This may well be the best book in this catalog. This is a book for people so, if you are a person, it is for you. If you are a dog, for instance,

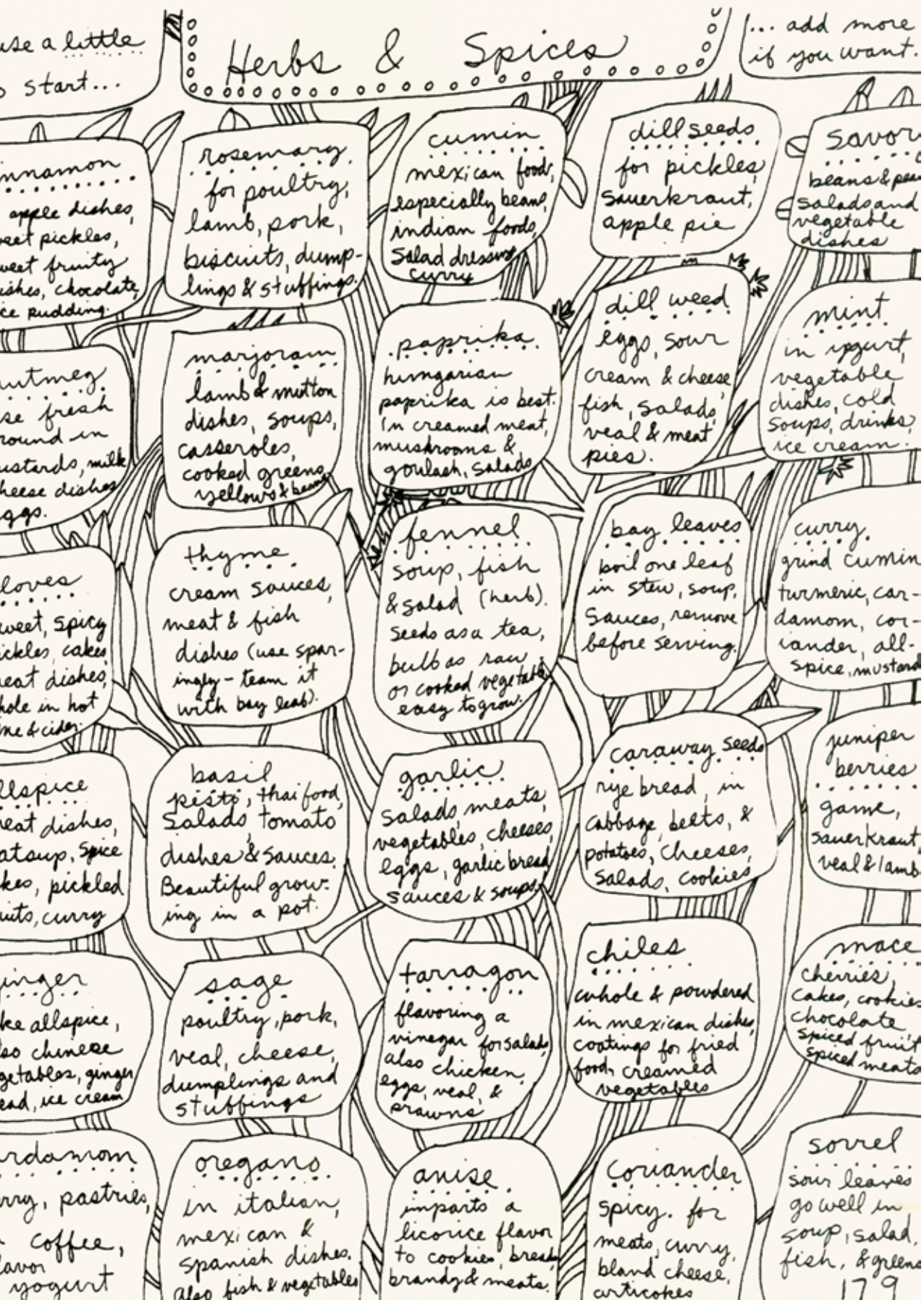


and you can't read very well, it just might be for you too, because of the drawings. Alicia Alicia Alicia she's our very own Bradford Angier." Bradford Angier penned more than 35 books on how to survive off the land. What a compliment! Can you talk about the "Whole Earth Catalog" for those readers who might not know about it?

The "Whole Earth Catalog," based in Menlo Park, near Stanford University, was a confluence of brilliant scholars interested in a more natural and spiritual life. Stewart Brand, the founder and editor of the catalog, still writes challenging critiques of modern living. Although the catalog actually did mail

order sales, it was more of a philosophical and literary publication. For example, it suggested that, if you are just learning a new skill, not to buy the most expensive tool, but rather to try a cheap tool, see if the skill still interests you and if you find you really enjoy and want to excel in it, get a better tool. It also stated that all of the books available from the catalog could be borrowed instead from a public library. As such, it was immensely influential and successful in the literary world of the early 1970s, even though it was not really a book, and was too tall to fit on a standard bookshelf.



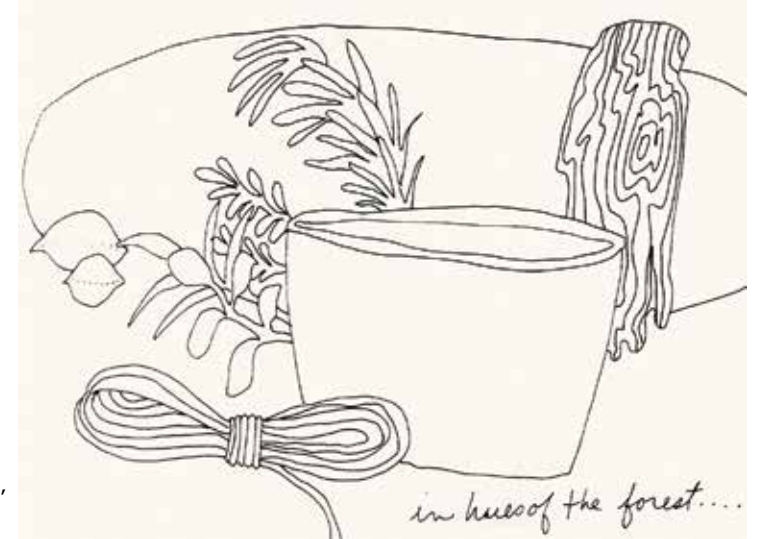


You also cite the artist Jean Varda as a major influence. I found a great short film made by his niece, the French filmmaker Agnes Varda. Have you seen it? He was a mentor to a lot of hippies. Did you ever get to meet and visit him in the houseboat community in Sausalito Bay (north of San Francisco) where he lived?

I lived on a houseboat in Gate 5, Sausalito in 1967, and I met Yanko (Varda's nickname, which means "uncle") when a neighbor, Stan McDaniel, invited me on a double date with Varda and Varda's lady friend Jacqueline. We sailed around the San Francisco Bay on Varda's colorful sailboat for several days. After that, I always brought him my artwork for critique, which he generously granted. He was already teaching at San Francisco Art Institute, and didn't need to give away this work for free, but he did. I have not seen Agnes Varda's film, but I would love to see it.

Your book gave the back-to-the-land movement the tools and skills it needed to live a self-reliant life off the grid. In addition to the invaluable instructions the book has to offer, *Living on the Earth* is also a historical document that reflects the utopian commune's experiments with sustainability, simplicity, community and environmentalism. The important legacies of the hippie movement of my youth are now pretty mainstream: recycling, organically grown food, composting, egalitarianism (between genders, ethnic groups and age groups),

communal households, sharing as opposed to hoarding, voluntary simplicity or frugality, non-religious spirituality, alternative healing techniques, free-form dancing, hatha yoga, tai chi, meditation, outdoor cultural festivals, backpacking around the world, barter, farmers' markets, free stores, free clinics, homebuilt



environmentally sound housing, natural fiber clothing, living together before getting married. We also embraced nonviolent action as a means to achieving political goals like ending the war in Vietnam and supporting the civil rights movement. That is not a hippie legacy, but we participated in it. What we can learn from all this is that unpopular but righteous ideas and actions can find their way to popular consensus over time.

About your book, Japan's poet laureate Shuntaro Tanikawa said, "I want to do everything in this book. If I can't do everything in this book, then I want to dream about it, because I know that if I do, I will be a better person to the marrow of my bones." I can't help but agree. Thanks, Alicia.