

Brattleboro Reformer

Wardsboro honors its roots with Gilfeather Turnip Festival

By Kevin O'Connor, Special to the Reformer

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WARDSBORO — How do you put a tiny remote town with only one real street on the map? This southeastern Vermont outpost of 900 is drawing crowds by declaring itself the birthplace of — drumroll, please — the newly designated state vegetable.

When local farmer John Gilfeather grew his first uncommonly tender and sweet namesake turnip a century ago, he tried to prevent others from propagating it by cutting off the tops and bottoms before selling the middles. Even so, he didn't foresee what his legacy would sprout.

The Gilfeather turnip — the hybrid is actually part rutabaga, but that's another story — would become a trademarked variety now sold in seed and softball-sized fruition. His hometown, for its part, successfully lobbied the Legislature this spring to deem it the state vegetable — a fact celebrated Saturday during a communitywide Gilfeather Turnip Festival.

"America's best turnip culinary event!" exclaims the town website that also includes a link to the official legislation ("An act relating to designating the Gilfeather turnip as the State Vegetable").

Wander down to the Main Street Town Hall and you could buy some of the 1,000 pounds of locally grown turnips piled outside the front door, then step

in to sample the vegetable's sweet white flesh and mild greens in Gilfeather turnip soup, Gilfeather turnip latkes and "Fluffy Gilfeather Turnip Soufflé."

"The flavor is very particular — very smooth and gentle," explains Gordon Hayward, a nationally recognized garden writer from nearby Westminster who has touted the vegetable coast to coast through the pages of *Horticulture* magazine.

Locals aren't the only ones talking up their roots. State lawmakers considered honoring kale (a transplant from ancient Greece, natives sniff) before honing in on what Slow Food USA deems "one of the state's unique contributions to cold weather agriculture."

"The Gilfeather is an egg-shaped, rough-skinned root, but unlike its cousins, it has a mild taste that becomes sweet after the first frost," Slow Food USA says. "While the hardy Gilfeather turnip does well in nearly any climate, this touch of frost contributes to its unusual taste and texture."

Adds *New York Magazine*: "The heirloom root (which is actually a rutabaga, Gilfeather's nomenclature notwithstanding) has a sweet flavor with a mild radish-like bite, and it's not too much to say it's the best-tasting rutabaga around."

As well as the most mysterious.

"Gilfeather never offered a biography of his creation but, of course, he was a Vermonter and thus taciturn by nature," the blog vegetablesofinterest.typepad.com opines. "It does make one think 'What's it all coming to?' when someone names a rutabaga after himself and calls it a turnip."

Tell that to the Friends of the Wardsboro Library, which harvested bushels of cash over the weekend selling \$20 Gilfeather Turnip Cookbooks ("hand bound with twig and twine," the group's publicity

promises), \$10 Gilfeather Turnip ornaments ("the perfect festival souvenir"), and \$8 Gilfeather Turnip tea towels that speak for themselves.

For his part, local 10-year-old Braiden Pearson went home with the festival's "Grand Champion" award for growing the biggest Gilfeather turnip (nearly 26 pounds) for a second year in a row.

"I wanted to see if I could win again," the fifth-grader said. "And I could." 🍂

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