

Sour Power

The Vinegar World of Lawrence Diggs

by Martin Fredricks

When Lawrence J. Diggs moved to Roslyn, S.D., (pop. 251) from San Francisco in 1989 looking for a quiet place to buy a house, write books, and do research on his favorite subject—vinegar—he couldn't have imagined the special relationship that would develop with the community.

Diggs, an international consultant to vinegar makers, found Roslyn after visiting small towns around the country. "Within 15 minutes I started meeting people, and they treated me just like I'd been here all my life," he recalls. "I never looked back, and it's been a great experience."



Lawrence Diggs is sweet on Roslyn, S.D.

Dave Arntson

Twelve years later, Diggs—appropriately called the Vinegar Man—is on a mission to empower townspeople with what he calls “the great sour power.”

So how did the community come to embrace the unique occupation of the Vinegar Man?

In 1998, Diggs and other residents concerned about the future of Roslyn and its sister community, Eden, (pop. 97) 11 miles to the north, formed the Committee for the Advancement of Roslyn and Eden (CARE). Its purpose was to improve the quality of life and find ways to attract new businesses. When it became clear outside businesses weren't interested, they turned inward to find their own strengths, and discussions kept returning to the Vinegar Man.

Diggs initially was reluctant, but he eventually agreed to help develop what may be the world's only International Vinegar Museum. Located in a formerly vacant building on Roslyn's Main Street, the museum features more than 200 vinegar varieties from around the world and has displays on every aspect of the sour substance, from its history to production methods.

“If it were just about a vinegar museum, I wouldn't do it,” says Diggs, author of *Vinegar*, a book which *Food Distribution* magazine called a bible on the subject in 1998. “The task, if you will, is to inspire, particularly your young people, to believe that they can create something from what they have.”

Since the museum opened in June 1999, hundreds of visitors from 40 states and 11 countries have been wowed by Diggs' extensive and unique knowledge. The grand finale of museum tours is a vinegar tasting led by the Vinegar Man himself.

“Vinegar is acetic acid that's made by natural processes from natural ingredients,” explains Diggs, who began researching vinegar while studying food science at San Francisco State University in the early 1980s. “Here you have a substance which can be used for medicine, food, cleaning, industry, pharmaceutical manufacture, plastic manufacture, photography.

“You can even make paper” from it, he adds. “That's powerful.”

While Diggs runs the day-to-day business of the museum, which is open from

June through October, it is owned and cared for by citizens of the two communities.

By any measure, the project is a success. Visitation to the museum continues to increase, and last August, the first annual International Vinegar Festival drew an estimated 1,000 people. In October, Roslyn and Eden were named a South Dakota Gold Community for their community development efforts.

More importantly, it has helped develop a can-do attitude. "Who would think that a vinegar museum would ever come about, especially in South Dakota?" asks Jenny Roerig, the museum's gift shop manager. "It has taught a lot of people that you can reach your goals."

It's clear the people of Roslyn and Eden feel fortunate to have Diggs leading the charge, and he returns the sentiment.

"This place is special, and the people here are special without even knowing it," Diggs says. "People often ask me, 'How did you get stuck in a place like Roslyn?' and I say, 'I got lucky.'"

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