

Memories of Maurie Fabbro and his farm, by Hans Gregory.

Fabbro's Fields, the large creek-front paddock on Bell Street, Eltham is a piece of land with great historical significance for Eltham. It was once the site of a thriving market garden, Fabbro's Farm. The Fabbro family acquired the rich alluvial land probably in about 1933, and began a market garden here. As well as Fabbro's Fields, Fabbro's Farm included almost the entire hill on the corner of Falkiner and Ely Streets, and most of the farmland situated along the Diamond Creek opposite the hill on Falkiner Street, now called Barak Bushland.

Maurie Fabbro, Mario to all the Italian visitors to the farm, Maurie to the rest of us, was second son to the Fabbro family. The Fabbros had two sons and no daughters. I never knew the parents. There is a great story about how the name Maurie was bestowed on him by the people he called 'the Monsalvat crowd' during WW2 to help anglicise the family and prevent them being swept away to the labour camps. There were delegations to the government, with someone from Monsalvat dressing up in a suit, to convince the government it was madness to send a market garden family off to chop firewood when there was such a shortage of food for those remaining at home, many farmers having gone to fight in the war. The Fabbro family were regulars at Monsalvat, sharing the Friday night feasts, up on the Monsalvat hill, on the other side of the valley from their farm, until at some stage there was a falling out.

Maurie told me that, growing up, he and his brother would wake up early and drive the truck to the Research chicken farm. Once there they would shovel the sloppy mess of chicken manure onto the Fabbro truck until full. This would be driven to the bottom paddock (Bell Street) unloaded and spread to fertilise the crops. Then he and his brother would go back home, have breakfast and go to school.

Many people remember the rows of artichokes that Maurie grew in the Bell Street paddocks. I have always remembered them as "triffids", like those in the John Wyndham story. The triffids were ploughed with a tractor, then hand planted from cuttings selected from the previous year's plants. The many rows were hand-hoed and watered with the help of the pump located on the bank of Diamond Creek.

Maurie had two tractors. There was the old grey Fergie (Fergusson), which he used for many of the ploughing and tilling tasks. There was the newer, red, Massey-Fergusson tractor. It was this tractor that went with him to the bottom paddock once the main farm land was sold. This is the tractor most people remember him by, driving along Bell street, Falkiner street or Ely street or ploughing the river flats. Each tractor had its own shed, the newer red tractor with a newer, flash shed, which is still standing on Fabbro's Fields.

Maurie would harvest the artichokes when they were mature. He carefully pruned each artichoke by hand, packed them into wooden or polystyrene crates, loaded them into his small van and drove at 4:30 or 5am into the Footscray Fruit and Veggie market to sell the produce. The family had the same stall there for decades.

Later in the season, car-loads of Italian families would arrive at the Fabbro villa, almost in convoy, to purchase crates of the smaller, sweeter artichokes which they would pickle and jar for year-long eating.

I have some artichokes growing in my garden at home now, in memory of Maurie.

But it was not only artichokes that the Fabbros grew. There was a great range of produce and the Fabbro family is credited with bringing zucchinis to Melbourne. This is documented in an interview in local newspaper *The Valley Weekly*, 21 June 2006 which features a photo of Maurie on the front page.

We lived in the Fabbro's old farm cottage on the hill at the rear of 55 Falkiner Street, Eltham from about 1987 until 1993. My understanding is that the cottage we lived on was one owned by the West family, one of two main first farming land holders in Eltham. We paid rent of \$50 per week, cash. This was for the single bedroom cottage, an outside bedroom attached to the barn, exclusive use of the stand-alone bathroom (remodelled inside the old fibro milk separating shed) and shared the use, with Maurie, of the outhouse-toilet. The outhouse was about a hundred yards from both the cottage and the villa.

We were a small community. We had to walk or drive on the dirt driveway track, past his house to get to the cottage, meeting-up, often daily or many times a day, as we both went about our business, or just to have a yarn. I'd help him de-snap his grass cutter blades behind the tractor from a mess of wire that had wound round the blades and shaft. I'd help plant seeds in the paddocks or hoe the crops. He'd give me seeds. We'd swap produce. He'd pat my favourite goose.

We, the last of many tenants, were evicted in 1993. We didn't want to leave and had no funds to do so. My wife was pregnant at the time and our plan had been to bring our first little baby back to that farm, an idea Maurie rejoiced in. But the property had been sold.

Maurie was able to stay a couple of extra years at the villa his family had built but he didn't realise that the contract stated that cottage had to be vacated, meaning that we would have to go. It seems that the developers wanted to demolish the cottage as fast as practicable, probably to minimise community outcry at the loss of a historically significant building.

I feel a responsibility to the story both of the West family cottage and the Fabbro Farm property, including the Italian Villa homestead that the Fabbro family built. We hear about the famous Italian restaurants and farmers across Melbourne. The Fabbro family is part of this legacy of local food production. As Maurie took pride in his organic farming practices, the land at Fabbro's Fields, Eltham, must be rich and potentially productive still.