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A Spud Lover's Exhibit That's No Small Potatoes

By PETER GOODMAN
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To all appearances, Jeffrey Allen Price is the real Mr. Potato Head. From the tip of his brown, wide-brimmed ranger hat festooned with the mighty tubers, past the brown "Think Potato" T-shirt to the rich, earth-brown boots, this is a man who has potatoes in his head, on his head and coursing through his veins. "The exciting thing about potatoes," Price said, "is that I think there are people like me all over the world, interested in potatoes." He was standing in a room of the Mills Pond House in St. James, surrounded by potato books, potato stamps, potato sacks, sliced potatoes, fat potatoes, shrunk potatoes.

Price plans to showcase their real power starting next Saturday at the stately farmhouse, headquarters of the Smithtown Township Arts Council, in an interactive and constantly growing exhibition called "Potato House." It's presented in conjunction with "Long Island Harvest," a display of work about local agriculture assembled by council executive director Allison Cruz.

The culmination of the whole event will occur the weekend of Sept. 20-21, during the fall equinox, with "Think Potato IV," a festival that is to include an appearance by the Dutch band De Aardappelers, named after van Gogh's painting "The Potato Eaters." The first festival took

place in Price's backyard in Springfield, Mo., in the spring of 1996; the next two were held in that city's parks. (Price is a native of Mesa, Ariz., but grew up in Springfield. He now lives in Rocky Point.)

Don't go thinking that this is just a weird eccentric out doing some crazy thing. Price, who will turn 31 on Thursday, is a serious artist who recently earned his master's of fine arts degree in studio arts from Stony Brook University, where his thesis was titled "Potato and Obelisk." His concentration on potatoes has turned him into an expert who can sprout information about the subject — from its origins in the Andes (the Quechua language has 1,000 words for potato) through the huge impact it made once introduced to Europe, to the Irish Potato Famine that brought a flood of mid-19th century immigrants to the United States. He owns hun-

dreds of books with "potato" in the title or in the subject matter, more than 100 songs, recordings (Barbie sings "Do the Mash Potato"), all sorts of potato mashers (but no German "potato masher" hand grenades yet — "too pricey"), toys, potato guns (and a potato bazooka powered by hair spray). You get the idea.

There will, of course, be a few of the toy Mr. Potato Heads, although Price has no great regard for them. "They're the least exciting thing about the potato, to me. There are so many richer contributions. I liked it better when they used real potatoes."

It's for good reason that Price's view of potatoes is not all fun and games (although "Potato House" will include a "potato comedy night" and "potato storybook readings"). His obsession, Price said, began in Springfield when he was a starving artist who discovered that he was surviving mostly on spuds. He sees the nutritious, versatile, starchy tubers as a means to several ends, among them to allow anyone to be an artist, to raise contributions to charity, to teach about community and society.

Price's motto, inscribed at the top of the Potato Philosophy page on his Web site, www.potatoengine.com, comes from the German artist Joseph Beuys, a founder of the Green Party: "Man is only truly alive when he realizes he is a creative, artistic being . . . even the act of peeling a potato can be considered a work of art if it is a conscious act."

Even though the spud is no longer a pillar of local farmers' crops, Long Island still is one of the main agricultural centers of New York State. Wine has replaced the once ubiquitous potato and duck, but farmland, farm views and farm memories are still everywhere, especially in Suffolk County. That's why the arts council's



Newsday Photo / Daniel Goodrich

Artist Jeffrey Allen Price with some of his potato-related artifacts

Cruz chose to run "Long Island Harvest" in conjunction with "Potato House."

So far, she said, most of the work on display will consist of paintings, with a few sculptures. The harvest exhibition will occupy all but two rooms of Mills Pond House's first floor, with "Potato House" in two downstairs rooms and throughout the second floor of the historical farm building.

"I'm trying to find out if Wickham Mills, who built the house in 1838, grew potatoes here," Cruz said. ■

"Long Island Harvest," July 26-Aug. 30.
"Potato House," July 26-Sept. 20. Mills Pond House, 660 Rte. 25A, St. James. Tuesdays-Fridays 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Weekends noon-5 p.m. Free. Call 631-862-6575, or go to www.stacarts.org.
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For a calendar of this week's Long Island arts and events go to www.newsday.com