

HEIRLOOMS

BY WARREN KALBACKER

BOYS OF SUMMER

Scallops, Pekins, sarsaparilla and other edible memories.

SOUTHOLD—“Wash off the potato dust before you come to the table!”

 A soil scientist might be hard pressed to define “potato dust,” but my mother issued that command daily during the summer harvest. My brother and I had been “helping out” on the Conkling’s Point farm which bordered our backyard. We’d ride the digger (that’s what we dubbed the harvester with the homemade sun shade) and cull potatoes. Neither of us was strong enough to heft a burlap bag, 100 pounds, on to the flatbed truck trailing behind.

“Use plenty of soap!”

Dinner could be fresh flounder with our neighbor’s potatoes—mashed, fried or au gratin. We ate baked potatoes skin and all. Corn, tomatoes and strawberries came from the stand “up at the head of the road.”

For those of us born on eastern Long Island, fresh local seafood and produce are part of life. The term “foodie” appeared years after my Arshamomaque childhood. We just enjoyed what Peconic Bay and the North Fork’s fields provided.

Our farming neighbors left bags of potatoes and heads of cauliflower and cabbage on the way home from their field. Local bluefish regularly appeared for dinner. My mother might make a quick trip to Greenport to buy lobsters off an incoming boat.

My mother, a busy teacher, adopted the minimalist approach to her fresh ingredients. Broiling was her preferred cooking method. She breaded Peconic Bay scallops with a light touch; the crumbs never overwhelmed the scallops’ sweetness. She even achieved some division of labor in the kitchen. My father shucked clams and oysters and grated cabbage for cole slaw. I husked corn, shelled peas and mashed potatoes.

I couldn’t know it, but these were the last years of eastern Long Island’s commodity style agriculture. The local farmers worked hard to feed New York City. Seed potatoes arrived in early spring from Maine and the Maritimes. Freighters tied up at Greenport’s Main Street dock and rail cars appeared on sidings in every town from Calverton through Southold.

Ploughs and harrows turned the earth for planting. (The fields, seeded with rye grass to hold the soil through winter, provided plenty of room for kite flying.) Farmers were determined to maximize the crop yield on the North Fork’s limited acreage. They’d cultivate a dozen rows of potatoes on the smallest lot, perhaps a fraction of an acre between a road and neighboring creek.

The potato harvest lasted through the summer. Early autumn crops included cabbage, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts. As a small boy, I perched on the giant Fairbanks-Morse scale at my great uncle’s Southold depot and watched farmers unload baskets of beans in the

summer twilight. His tractor trailers delivered the produce to city markets before dawn.

Autumn vegetables did give way to the odd can of creamed corn and boxes of frozen peas in our household. But it was also time to reach into the cupboard for jars of paper thin “bread and butter” pickles and strawberry preserves, courtesy of an older woman who lived a few houses away.

In October, scallopers began to work Pipes Cove, across the street from our house. My father would pick up a pint for a week-day dinner. Maybe he’d heard that a Greenporter was shucking in his garage



Photographs: Courtesy of Musnicki Family



on Fifth Street. Dad also confided his favorite Pipes Cove clamming spot to me. Unfortunately, I remember only one of the landmarks he used to triangulate it. (It's the Greenport water tower.) We enjoyed plenty of clams on the half shell, but he'd save the biggest quahogs for chowder. I never even heard of clam chowder made with cream and milk until I went off to school in Massa-chusetts. Who says New Yorkers aren't provincial?

Freshly shucked oysters were a Sunday dinner first course. I'd discover the oyster years later. I preferred clams as a boy. They tasted as briny as Peconic Bay itself.

I cared for a pair of mallards in a backyard pen, and at the same time developed a taste for the Pekins raised in Peconic Bay's tributary creeks. All dark meat! And not all beef made its way to the North Fork from western feedlots. The family with acreage near our house pastured a few cattle near their farmhouse, a mile or so away. The steaks they provided surely were a gesture of friendship. My brother and I could not have been that helpful as field hands.

As I grew older I took pleasure in introducing friends to the natural beauty and the good food of the North Fork. A pot of steamed clams or a whole baked bluefish made a wonderful centerpiece at a table surrounded by college buddies. I've enjoyed the look on the face of an Iowa-born girlfriend as she encountered a cherrystone on the half shell.

As a young adult I uncorked the first vintage from Cutchogue. My parents and I toasted the obvious: a fine meal prepared with fresh local ingredients could now be savored with local wine. We hailed from a viticultural "zone of production." Of course, as a boy I successfully paired Mr. Gloria's Greenport-bottled root beer and sarsaparilla with meals of local ingredients.

A shadow did loom over my childhood years. A ten year old notices sweating migrant workers on their knees in the fields. Some less mechanized farms hired the workers to hand dig potatoes out of the ground. I'd later learn that Edward R. Murrow reported on eastern Long Island's labor conditions in his documentary *Harvest of Shame*. I would not have considered it a revelation: my school



Musnicki Farm, Sagaponack. **Opposite:** Gathering spuds, 1928. **Above:** Digging spuds, 1941.

bus route passed a labor camp.

I lost the family connection to the East End years ago but my bond with the local bounty has strengthened. I return to my Manhattan home from North Fork visits with vegetables, wine and seafood. I tend oysters in the community garden at the Southold Project in Aquaculture Training (SPAT). The organization works to restore Peconic Bay's shellfishery. That's a worthy goal, nearly as important to me as finding an alternative to the high prices at New York City oyster bars. SPAT generously allows its members to keep half their harvest.

I favor the rail trip to the North Fork. My eyes wander from the morning paper as the train passes through the vineyards and, thank goodness, some farm fields. A few of the old "potato houses," recycled to other businesses, remain along the tracks. I know where to look.

And sometimes I'm surprised. I occasionally shop in a nondescript supermarket on 14th Street, where customers don't look for fingerlings or creamers in the produce aisle. One afternoon I spotted bags printed: "Cutchogue, L.I., N.Y." I snapped up ten pounds. I sure enjoyed mashed potatoes that night. And I savored knowing that on *my* North Fork, farmers still cultivated potatoes just like the ones the farm neighbors left off in burlap bags in our backyard. □

The writer, who often hikes from the Southold rail station to the SPAT oyster garden at Cedar Beach Creek, is a frequent contributor to Playboy and Cigar Aficionado.