

IN THE KITCHEN

BY PAT MARLOWE



SUMMER IN A JAR

How a team of women making pesto, corn salsa, and lots of vinegar could save the East End's farms.

CUTCHOGUE—If you're interested in bottling the bliss of summer, Jayne McCahill has some advice. "24 hours from the vine to the brine," she said recently. "Use absolutely fresh vegetables. No imperfections, no little spots. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Mrs. McCahill should know. She's not just a home canner or hobby pickler. Each year, she jars, brines, dehydrates, crystallizes, and otherwise preserves thousands of pounds of local fruits and vegetables as part of the team of talented women at A Taste of the North Fork in Cutchogue. In doing so, the company doesn't just extend the harvest for East End eaters. It fills a gaping hole in the local food chain by helping farmstands offer their customers prepared foods to accompany raw fruits and veggies.

On a sweltering mid-August morning, A Taste of the North Fork's kitchen was buzzing by 7 a.m. Food processors whirred, double boilers steamed, and glass jars rattled, as two women cut corn, tomatoes and hot peppers into corn salsa for Harbes Family Farms in Mattituck, sliced long, thin Asian cucumbers from Sang Lee Farms in Peconic for kimchi, and stewed Marzano tomatoes from Sang Lee Farms for a chunky garlic and basil tomato sauce. Within a few hours, the ranks would swell to eight cooks and everyone would be sweating, since the day's chores included heat-sealing several boxes of jars in a boiling water bath. The company offers flexible work hours, and has attracted an all-female staff including some new mothers and some veteran mothers who are returning to the work-

force. "It's a handmade, labor intensive job," said Mrs. McCahill. "We deal with fresh ingredients and we do it in small batches. Which means it can be crazy. You put the apron on and you cook until you're done."

But, because the work changes with the seasons, "it's never boring," said co-founder Jeri Woodhouse. Spicy rhubarb relish in June. Gooseberry jam and currant syrup in July. August brings bushels of pansies, violets, and other edible flowers that need to be crystallized, a riot of herbs that need to be dried for spice rubs and culinary salts, and cucumbers, tomatoes, and peaches that become pickles, salsa, and jam, respectively. By September, the kitchen staff has pear and apple chutney on the brain. Before long, the race to turn pumpkins into vinaigrettes, wine jellies, and mustards begins to compete with filling orders for A Taste of the North Fork's holiday gift basket business. (Of course, the company uses some exotic ingredients that aren't grown nearby. It makes a popular chocolate merlot sauce with wine from Bedell Cellars.)

"Much more tourist business is coming to farmstands and people are traveling greater distances," said Mrs. Woodhouse. "They can't necessarily take home perishable things that won't survive in that

Above: From left, Jayne McCahill, Jeri Woodhouse, and Shannon Harley at Garden of Eve's Garlic Festival where they sold herb-garlic spreads, pickled garlic, garlic vinegar, and garlic gelée.

TOMATO GLUT SAUCE

From Joan Dye Gussow, *This Organic Life: Confessions of a Suburban Homesteader* (Chelsea Green, 2001)

I have titled this recipe Tomato Glut Sauce because it's what you do when you're short of time and the tomatoes are sitting there on the counter looking reproachfully at you as the fruit flies gather round. Or, worse yet, when the fruits are looking so vulnerable with their sunken spots that you have to refrigerate them and thus end forever their future as fresh sliced tomatoes.

What you need to know about this recipe is that it is more forgiving than your favorite aunt. The ingredients, other than the tomatoes, garlic, and balsamic vinegar, are pretty much up to you, depending on what you have too much of. I have put in a lot of cut-up peppers. I have used eggplant and zucchini in place of the carrots. And since I never grow celery, only celery leaf, I put some of that in. The secret seems to lie in the balsamic vinegar and the roasting process itself.

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Put into a large roasting pan:

6 lb. tomatoes (plum are best), cored and quartered
1½ c. coarsely chopped carrots (optional)
1½ c. coarsely chopped celery (optional)
1½ c. coarsely chopped onions or scallions
9 cloves garlic, coarsely chopped
6 tbs. balsamic vinegar
1 bay leaf
1½ tsp. salt (or less)
1 tbsp. freshly ground black pepper
1½ tsp. each fresh thyme, oregano, basil, parsley

Roast for 45 minutes or until vegetables are soft. Process briefly to leave slightly chunky, and freeze in 2-cup portions. Makes 2 qts. (4 lbs.).

Below: Jeri Woodhouse packs a box of wedding favors for someone's special day.



three-hour drive on the LIE in traffic.”

While this collaboration between a commercial kitchen and nearby farmstands and wineries now seems completely logical, it actually grew out of a chance encounter. In the mid-1990s, Mrs. Woodhouse, who had just left a job as the head of a domestic violence agency “to do something closer to home,” expanded her organic garden, a shy acre in Orient, and began selling

edible flowers at a Locust Valley farmers market. When customers consistently bought her out, Mrs. Woodhouse started to combine her popular flowers with mesclun from neighboring Sang Lee Farms in Peconic, buying the salad greens the night before market and washing them in her bathtub. When Karen Lee became curious about this regular buyer of large amounts of salad, the farm started to sell Mrs. Woodhouse's flowers and then experiment with its own. Before long, Mrs. Woodhouse, a self-taught cook, was making a popular line of salad dressing for Sang Lee's farmstand. (Today, the kitchen makes over 30 products for Sang Lee, including stir-fry sauces, pestos, soups, and salsas.)

Around the same time, Mrs. McCahill, a former owner of a heating supply company who had begun to dabble in her own food businesses—friends and family anxiously awaited each new batch of pickles—attended a talk that Mrs. Woodhouse gave on edible flowers at the Hallockville Farm. The two hit it off, promptly incorporated, and moved their respective operations out of their homes and into the 1800-square foot kitchen in Cutchogue.

Immediately, farmstands began to sign up and so did wineries. Today, despite a brisk business in gift baskets sold from A Taste of the North Fork's website, about 80 percent of the work is still wholesale. “The way it works the best,” explained Mrs. Woodhouse, “is if I'm making pesto for EECO Farm [in East Hampton]. They cut the basil or arugula in the morning. We pick it up and turn it around and it's right back on their stand hopefully that day. So it's as fresh as fresh can be.”

It's an evolving relationship that allows the company to feature the flavors of a particular farm. “If you grew Merlot and your neighbor grew Merlot, the jellies we make are going to taste different,” said Mrs. Woodhouse. The company recently used pinot noir from The Old Field vineyard in Southold to make pinot noir jelly, packed in small, hexagonal jars and wrapped in an embossed paper cube, for a wedding at the winery.

After the team creates a new recipe, it endures an endless series of taste-tests. “We stand around during lunch and critique it,” said Shannon Harley, who has been with the company for one year and is the youngest employee at 22. “It's dangerous. It's very tempting to overindulge.” Ms. Harley, for instance, recently discovered that one of the company's new fruit chutneys is a perfect foil for pork, whether spread on chops, tenderloin, or a sandwich.

Among the company's more unique specialties are infused vinegars. At any particular time, A Taste of the North Fork is aging 20 different varieties of vinegar, including basil, blueberry, and garlic. For its “broken tomato vinegar,” A Taste of the North Fork soaks buckets full of fresh, chopped tomatoes in vinegar for up to three months to create a base. After straining out the tomatoes, the vinegar is diluted with purified water, it is bottled and in goes little pieces of heirloom tomatoes, garlic cloves, and basil leaves. The company has even started making its own vinegar from local white and red wine. (Right now, the company is buying from a Fingerlakes vinegar maker.) “Nearly every recipe that we make has vinegar of some sort in it. And that gives it an extra something,” she said, listing herbed mustards, dressings, and pickled peas, garlic, and carrots.

The dependence on vinegar—one of humanity's oldest preservatives—is a good metaphor for the business itself. Consider its lavender-infused Orient honey or the edible flowers which are sold mainly to Peconic Baking Company for all-natural decorations on cakes and tarts. “They make an ordinary desert really pop,” said Mrs. Woodhouse. Even though the colors might have faded to “a Victorian hue” by January, “in the middle of the winter, just that tiny little hint of summer is magical.”

And for those crops that are past their peak, miss the tourist rush, and might otherwise rot, A Taste of the North Fork also comes to the rescue. “Some of the tomatoes or berries that are overripe are fabulous for cooking,” Mrs. Woodhouse said. “We can give them another life.” □