

## IN THE KITCHEN

BY MARY MORGAN

# A CHEF FOR ALL SEASONS

*A lover of great food feeds Westhampton.*

WESTHAMPTON—A handsome ursine fellow with sky blue eyes, Starr Boggs grew up on the Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay in Virginia, on an expansive family farm where “everything we ate, we raised.” A visitor to the farm would find fruit orchards, chickens, tomatoes, even a dock. Boggs, as a kid, loved everything about living bayside, before he went to William and Mary on a football scholarship: the oyster beds, crab pots, raking clams, even the cooking. He would play around in the kitchen with his mother and grandmother. “I loved food,” he says, “it’s what we did.”

The family had a smoke house, cured their own hams, made sausage and scrapple, a kind of polenta or corn meal mush using pork leftovers. “The first frost and hog killing was my favorite time of year” says Boggs, with the entire family involved in transforming livestock into food. And what they didn’t consume, they swapped. “We traded chicken eggs for soap.”

Historic towns, meandering creeks, lush salt marshes, white sand barrier beaches, crabs and clams, all characterize the Eastern Shore. Far out on the extreme end of the Delmarva Peninsula, few residents dwell amidst hundreds of miles of bay and ocean shoreline, home to shorebirds, seabirds, and migrating water fowl. This was Boggs’



Ken Biggs, dinner chef at Starr Boggs’, works the busiest line in Westhampton, putting out up to 400 meals on a Saturday night, but keeping the emphasis on what’s fresh and from here.

first cooking school, a fitting prelude to the chef’s 25 year mission to celebrate another maritime community. When Boggs, who wintered in Nantucket, was invited to open the new Inn at Quogue in 1981 and came for a first look around, he was taken with the roll of the land and the vast assortment of fresh seafood. “It’s just like home,” he remembers thinking.

“In those days, you could go gardening,” Boggs recalls, a sort of foraging for ingredients he did with his friend Marjorie Taylor. Much more of the land south of the Highway in Sagaponack was farms and potato fields running to the sea. “I couldn’t believe no restaurants were using local product,” Boggs recalls. “Twenty five years ago, I feel like it was just John Ross and me” featuring local produce “and, of course, there was Ted [Conklin] at the American Hotel.”

Boggs praises local farmers and their dedication to excellence, especially the Green Thumb in Water Mill, Satur Farms in Cutchogue, and Corwin [Crescent Duck Farm in Aquebogue] “who raises the best ducks in the world.” But he admits it has gotten a lot harder to source locally. “When I



had my restaurant on Sunset [in Westhampton Beach], I used Skelly's Farm in Aquebogue. Shelly [the manager] who was running it sourced all the produce for me. You have to have someone like that."

A recent find for Boggs is Bello Poultry Farm in Holbrook, which raises squab, Muscovy duck, guinea hen, and petit chicken. "Want to see 'em?," he asks, eager to show off his find and already ushering towards the walk-in freezer. He leaned down and pulled out a shelf fully stocked with poultry. Gently nudging a chicken, he coos, "Don't they look beautiful?"

It was 10 a.m., Chef Starr had to get to work. So we left him, the Natural, in his huge sparkling stainless steel kitchen, boning a pink-fleshed salmon.

#### A TOUCH FOR FISH

Melt-in-your-mouth swordfish was my first introduction to Starr Boggs' Westhampton Grill on Parlato Place. It's a dish I have tried to replicate at home, now a family favorite. What made him think of broiling swordfish in mayonnaise? "When I started cutting the

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swordfish thicker, I was looking for a way to keep in the moisture," he said. So he began using his own mayonnaise, adding basil, and cooking the steak fast and hot. (Alas, the Health Department now prohibits the use of raw eggs in restaurants.) Another favorite

is his aromatic lavender shortbread, made with flower blossoms picked in early July, or even with dried lavender.

One warm Thursday evening we trekked to Starr Boggs' for the famous prix fixe menu, which started in 1981 at \$19.81. It has since gone up a penny a year to this year's \$20.06. (From Memorial Day to Labor Day, the Thursday Night Special is \$30, and still a terrific value.)

The lively garden patio had a wine tasting at one cabana bar and Boggs in his chef whites at another, chatting with customers as he placed sauced poached salmon on appetizer plates. Inside the rambling Westhampton landmark, we sat near one of the large, open windows. Pale green walls, white linens and comfortable wooden chairs comprise the decor.

The short menu featured an intriguing panoply of local fish, shellfish and duck, as well as braised lamb shanks and calf's liver (a world of difference from what my mother used to make.) Sweet Peconic Bay littlenecks peeking out of green parsley garlic sauce, paired with crisp tomato bruschetta, was a tantalizing starter. A stunning plate of greens, toasted walnuts and duck liver paté was rich and creamy. We drank the "House White" a mainly steel-fermented chardonnay cus-

tom blend Boggs developed at The Lenz Winery in Peconic.

Boggs' sure touch for fish was evident in the perfectly cooked striped bass, sourced from Virginia until the local season in July, and its Bernini fountain of curvy orecchiette, littlenecks, shrimp and fennel cream. The table favorite, after heated debate, was an inspired duet of land and sea, an almond encrusted flounder nested in a sweet potato purée and overseen by a glazed banana. A crème brûlée fan at our table rejoiced as Boggs' is exceptional.

Knee problems explain why Boggs is not spending as much time in the kitchen as he would like. "I had a knee operation and I can't stand as long; I don't want to go through that again," he laments. However the Grill has a strong chef team including his longtime colleague Frank Lucas, and more recently, Ken Biggs, the restaurant's dinner chef. "I think Frank and I have been cooking together going on 30 years," said Boggs, which would have included many of his former village and waterfront locations: Patio, Hampton Square and the eponymous ones on Dune Road and Sunset.

Many people are familiar with Starr Boggs from his energetic community-minded work, catering grand 500-person get-togethers for local non-profits, such as the annual East End Hospice summer gala fundraiser, held this June at an estate in Quogue, or extravaganzas for the American Heart Association, the Family Counseling Center and Riverhead Hospital. He also fed the volunteers fighting the intensive Pine Barrens wildfire several years ago.

Some may remember the first Long Island Barrel Tasting and Barbecue in 1990, a tented, sit-down affair at Hargrave Vineyard, which was an early effort to promote the budding wine region. "Marvin Shanken [publisher of *The Wine Spectator*] and I came up with the idea," remembers Boggs. "I used to cater his staff parties at his Westhampton home." It was Shanken, credits Boggs, who totally carried the ball and supported the local industry's barrel tasting events for the next several years.

Next door, steps from the restaurant, sits a little brick building in a cottage garden of June poppies, dazzling pink, white and salmon. Above the door reads "Starr Boggs Fish." Boggs started this new venture in April 2005, and this spring it received an interior facelift and new colors.

Open six days a week in summer (closed Tuesdays), the market is spectacularly popular. Beth C'Alessio, the manager, has stocked it with Boggs' signature creations: rémoulade, mayonnaise, tartar and cocktail sauces, garlic butter, as well as fresh produce, breads, cheeses, milk, eggs—all from regional farms. C'Alessio wanted to create a place in Westhampton "where you could get good bread, cheese, and olive oil." And she has succeeded. Check out the Fig Bouquet vinegar and the Greek Iliada Kalamata olive oil.

Although modest Boggs doesn't trace a cooking style inherited from his youthful involvement with family meal preparations ("we weren't good cooks by any means"), he notes with pride "it was wholesome, that's what it was." Perhaps, however, he does carry on a family legacy from his mother: "I can't believe how much food she put out from that little stove." □