

# HEIRLOOMS

BY EILEEN M. DUFFY

## MAKING HORSERADISH

*Spring comes, and the eyes water.*

Although it may seem perfect that a horseradish party is held on a horse farm, it's an accident. Surrounded by horses and next to the vines that tell of the future of North Fork agriculture, the people of Riverhead gather each year on the Wednesday before Easter to perform a ritual, honor the roots of the area, and just have fun.

Dick O'Dea, who with his wife June hosts the party at their North Wind Farm on Herricks Lane, took on the event 10 years ago after the affair got too big to be held indoors.

"I don't send out invitations," said O'Dea, "because everyone is invited."

The origins of the party come from Pete Danowski, who 28 years ago was working as a prosecutor in the Riverhead court system. He said two court reporters, Art Penny of the *Long Island Press* and Don Smith of *Newsday*, decided they needed an excuse to have a party, and invited lawyers, judges and prosecutors to help transform the horseradish root into its more recognizable form suitable for bloody Marys and an accompaniment for Easter ham.

"For one day, we put aside our differences," said Danowski. Soon the guys were taking over kitchens and Cuisinarts while drinking beer and eating clams and oysters. "But wives started to protest," said Danowski, "because when they went to make a cake using their Cuisinarts they ended up tasting like horseradish."

Specific tools were procured, a system was implemented, and now—with the efficiency of an assembly line—men, women and children churn out the pungent garnish for the lines of people who show up with glass Mason jars to stock up for the year.

Chris Fragnito of Riverhead was filling two jars he said would last him until next spring. "But the secret is to use a plastic spoon," he said, "to keep it from turning brown." That sparked a volley of advice from the men and women manning the five food processors that were

finely grinding the larger pieces that had come from a Cold War-era grinder that was making short work of the roots that had already been scraped and chopped by hand into manageable pieces.

"No, you have to use a wooden spoon," said one woman. "Never put it in plastic," said another. "You'll never get the smell out."

And what a smell. With the wind blowing the eye-watering aroma across the field, the reason for holding the project outdoors was evident.

For this year's event, the group bought 15 bushels of horseradish from Phil Schmidt's farm on Roanoke Avenue. The roots are coming

in cleaner than in the past, said Danowski, which makes the afternoon easier. Next, seated on bales of hay, 20 plus volunteers scrape the skins into large metal basins. While Doug Sowinski opens clams and Danowski grills kielbasa, the mixers add lemon juice and vinegar to the horseradish. "One year we ran out and used vodka," said Danowski.

The ritual goes back to the Polish farmers who settled in Riverhead in the 19th century, said Jack Kratoville. "They ate what was in season because they didn't have refrigeration. Horseradish can last in the ground all winter and be ready for the spring." (Spring is also the best time to transplant or divide the leafless plant to create new horseradish patches.)

Horseradish is a traditional accompaniment for Easter ham at Polish tables and at St. Isidore's church in Riverhead is included in the blessing of the food. It is also part of the



### MAKING YOUR OWN HORSERADISH

The folks at North Wind Farm wing it when mixing up their horseradish. The ingredients are basic: horseradish root and vinegar or lemon juice. The amount of liquid added depends on how loose you like your condiments. Grind the horseradish as finely as possible by chopping, peeling, or any other means—a food processor will likely not be up to the task of chopping the fibrous root without any prep. Once it's in smaller pieces a food processor will work, but don't use one that will go back into the kitchen to perform other jobs. You will not be able to get the scent out. Sometimes ground beets are added to horseradish to provide sweetness and color.

Seder dinner held during Passover.

"I spoon it in my mouth just like ice cream," said Danowski. Bob Rogers said he eats it with Easter dinner, but the ones who really enjoy it are the horses.

"The horses love it," he said. "Why do you think they call it horseradish? It's not peopleradish. That's not hard to figure out." □