

FARMER'S JOURNAL

GROWING COMMUNITY

*Roots Reach Deep and Harvest
Is Rich on the Farm*

BY MARY BROWER

Even on national holidays, animals need to be fed and crops need to be gotten in. Though we weren't able to get home for Thanksgiving that year, there we were at the table with our first child, just 6 days old, and along with us were my father and brothers. Also with us was an extended family of friends, including a number of fellow farmers.

Now, I am a person who would love cooking even if I didn't enjoy eating as much as I do. But there's something about cooking for farmers that makes me recall that food is neither a cheap nor an infinite resource.

When I'm preparing food I bought at a supermarket, it is easy for me to forget that the meal's very origins do not exist in the shopping event that took place the day before. But when I am cooking for farmers, I remember that neither the heroism I've undergone in the parking lot nor the monumental stack of dishes that lies before me is the whole of the story, and that even the candlelight and togetherness occurring between the two are but grace notes in a long cycle of work and care.

In the same way that holiday meals connect us to both those who are and are not able to sit down with us at the table, the process of preparing a special meal does not begin nor end with my own hands.

A holiday toast that makes you cry, a meal whose purpose is to express gratitude. Food—there's just something about it. What else could be both a necessity and one of our great pleasures?

That first time Aaron and I shared the holidays together as a family we were living in a 300-year-old farmhouse in New England. Set back from the banks of a tidal river, that house held some of the great turning points in our lives. It was there we sold the sailboat we'd bought with our first married tax return (a moment that marked a certain shift in our adult lives) and where we welcomed our first child to the world. But most of all, it was where we got earnest about farming.

A local historian once told us the house had been part of an important trade route in colonial days. We knew it was common back then for most men to be farmers, but we were surprised to learn that even then, most farmers also held down second jobs. Since



transcontinental shipping took place by sail 15 generations ago, that deep river channel provided the first inhabitants of our house with a reliable second income. During the growing season they farmed the rich tidal plain bordering the river, and during the winter they traded rum and molasses with the Leeward Isles of the Caribbean.

These farmers had access to a degree of material wealth that wasn't common for smallholders, and it also meant they had the luxury both to travel and to farm. Perhaps it's appropriate, then, that it was in this house, part way station for sailors and part home place for farmers, that formed the pivot between the deep roots we are developing today and the profound placelessness that marked the first half of our adult lives.

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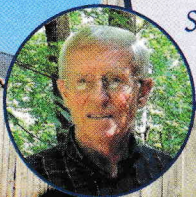
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In the years before we grew up and moved home to Northern Michigan, I'd begun to wonder if we weren't living in a way that Annie Dillard characterized as "not so much free as loose." And then one day, there we were: in our mid-30s and not too far from Aaron's hometown, signing the papers on a farm. When the previous owner kissed my cheek and handed over the keys, I saw myself at once to be a mother stepping through the door for the first time, a widow welcoming the new family to this place and an immigrant from Prague whose husband had just raised the newly hewn rafters on her hundred-year-old barn.

People often ask us why we chose to name our farm after Bluestem grass, and part of the answer is that we loved the sound of the name. But even more, we were fascinated by the unusually tough root structure of these plants, reaching deeper than they grew tall. Having spent much of our lives as landless fellow travelers with nothing to our names but some strange resumes, we kind of liked the sound of that.

We keep places, and they hold us in place—that's how it works. As custodians of this farm, Aaron and I understand that it's our job to care for something that is by nature public. Anyone driving by on M-32 has no choice but to take in the landscape, and we feel the responsibility involved in that, but there's so much more involved than just the view. The soil and water that pass through our vegetables and animals also belong to our neighbors and customers and friends, as well as the generations who are even yet following us all. When people choose to support responsible family farms, they lay claim to this idea that what happens to their food before it gets to the table does indeed matter.

The Latin roots that make up the word "community" mean something like "the gift of togetherness," and as we move into the second year of our farm's community-supported agriculture (CSA) harvest subscription program, we have already begun to sense the stirrings of this gift. With our members' decisions to forego the absolute convenience and choice of the open-all-night and the transnational, they have agreed to make possible the values this type of food represents.

A big part of any community is trust, and in this community of local food we have chosen to trust each other not only with our money, but also with our limited time and our uncertain futures. As farmers in this exchange, we agree to be accountable for all that, and with gratitude.

When I was a professional cook preparing food for strangers, I often felt I couldn't do my job properly because I had no idea who was at the other end of the fork. Being a community farmer is quite the opposite experience.

While many of Bluestem Farm's big harvests took place during the earlier part of fall, warmer days at this time of year find us harvesting roots like sunchokes and rutabagas, hardy alliums like leeks, along with brassicas like kale and collards and Brussels sprouts until they are all gone. By late afternoon, when the sun has warmed the ground, commuters orbiting home on the state road see the shapes of little Peter and his father and sometimes myself against the background, pulling in another hundredweight of hardy roots from the rows.

When there is snow or when the ground is too frozen to dig, our focus moves indoors. Amidst the full freezers, a hoophouse banked with greens, and a walk-in cooler stacked high with sweet roots, we begin to mark the transition between ceaseless motion of the high season and the no-less-essential work of reflection wintertime brings.

As we wash the vegetables, we wonder what we have learned. As we transition the animals to their winter housing in the barns, we ask ourselves how our actions have kept pace with our plans. As we care for the plants in the hoophouse, we think about what the land has taught us about itself this year, of its love of the plant family *Brassicaceae*, and of how well it might like to support a growing pig population in its wooded margins.

Late fall and early winter are also an excellent time to catch up with cultural activities. Antrim County hasn't ever been accused of having the flaws of a major cosmopolitan area, but by the same token, it also lacks some of the gifts of city life. Without plenty of public hubs for people to get together, it is hard to find anywhere to be except work or home where you aren't expected to spend money.

Because it's our great privilege to own a collection of old barns, we are happy to open our farm as a kind of outpost for the public sphere. And while in earlier months we made a point of organizing big community events like concerts and food preservation parties and fundraisers for various causes, this time of year we shrink the circle down a little and offer more intimate events to farm members and neighbors: barn movies in sleeping bags, potlucks and small gatherings.

Today, when I dip into a crock of pickles or open a jar of pesto we put up with CSA members on those last few sunny, glorious days in late September, I revel in the beauty and quality of the food, but it is the memories of the bustle and togetherness that warm me the most.

In choosing to make a life out of farming, Aaron and I ply the one trade we felt we had the most to learn from. Of all the things we might have done with our lives, farming has a way of ever offering us something new to study, and the endless potential for building strength through community.

At least once a week and all throughout the year, our farm's members and neighbors are the people we see, the folks we know, the stories that fill our thoughts. And though these relationships are new, they still show the signs of becoming a community that is abiding and real.

On any given day, we might have visits from neighbors who offer to help us prepare that field they know we have no tractor for, or who bring a gift of heating wood they know we've been too busy to bring in ourselves, or baby clothes for our new daughter. We trade pork for apples, chicken for money, and ideas for putting up grapes the fastest. When there is an illness, people bring food. There are birthday flowers, cheers for babies just learning to walk, concerned conversations about the health of aging parents and young children.

And as our farming project matures and we are able to offer better and more, we also expect our life's project to go forward alongside new stories of the travails and successes of children going off to college, photos of weddings, new family resemblances and, of course, favorite recipes handed down. *eGT*



This essay is part of a series of articles on local farming by Mary Brower. Mary and her husband, Aaron, own Bluestem Farm, a four-season community farm in East Jordan that offers a build-your-own winter CSA program that runs through March 2014. Learn more about the vibrant community around Bluestem Farm at BluestemFarm.net.

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META GIVEN'S PUMPKIN PIE

From Bluestem Farm

Pumpkin pie made from scratch doesn't need to be a complicated project, but the extra step of scorching the filling before baking makes this pie outstanding.

This tip comes to us from the 1947 cookbook by Meta Given called the *Modern Encyclopedia of Cooking*. Despite its claims to modernity, the book contains several recipes, like Fricassee of Muskrat, that devotees of traditional foods will appreciate. Ms. Meta would have us know that "scorching the pumpkin, like Grandma did, gives excellent flavor."

Winter squash and pumpkin are totally interchangeable as fillings for pumpkin pie—in fact, much of the canned pumpkin available in stores is actually made from butternut squash. If you want to go with squash instead of a pie pumpkin, look for dense-fleshed varieties like buttercup or butternut.

The crust in this recipe is made with leaf lard, an odorless, wonderful fat that comes not from the back of a pig, but from around its organs. To our great-grandmothers, it was one of the most important fats in the kitchen. It contains less saturated fat than butter, is available locally from Bluestem Farm and produces a superb and tender crust—fabulous for sweet pies. If you can't find it or don't want it, substituting butter for the lard portion will work just fine. For a friend's wedding, I helped make dozens of pies using this crust.

Pie Filling

- 1¾ cups roasted pumpkin or squash
- 1 cup maple syrup
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 3 tablespoons grated fresh ginger
- half of a nutmeg nut, grated
- 2 eggs
- 1 cup cream

Lard Crust

- ⅓ cup lard
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 1½ cups flour
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- 3–6 tablespoons ice water

Preheat oven to 375°. Cut squash in half, scrape out seeds and place cut side down on a baking sheet. Add 1 cup boiling water to the sheet and bake for about 30 minutes, or longer if your squash or pumpkin is large. You're looking for very soft flesh. This can be done up to several days before you bake the pie.

When preparing the crust, use the high school science method of displacement to get an accurate measurement of the lard: Fill a glass measuring cup with 1 2/3 cups cold water, then drop in spoonfuls of lard until the level of the water reaches 2 full cups. When you pour out the water, you'll be left with exactly 1/3 cup of the good stuff.

Cut the lard and butter into the flour and salt with a pastry blender, then add ice water a little at a time. Since room humidity and the type of flour used have a big impact on how much water is required, it's hard to say exactly how much water you are going to need. If you add enough water to make a smooth, sticky ball, your crust will come out disappointing and chewy. What you want at this stage is a slightly shaggy ball of dough.

Flour a piece of parchment paper and roll the dough out onto it. Holding the pie plate inverted over the rolled-out dough, perform the flip. Trim the edges and then crimp them with a fork or your fingers. Chill the unpricked, formed crust in the fridge for an hour. Meta Given tells us that a hot filling combined with a cold crust is the secret to a no-crack surface.

This recipe is heavy on the fresh ginger—my preference, not Meta's. For easy grating, freeze a thumb's worth of whole ginger, skin and all. When it's frozen hard, the fibers inside won't clog the grater. Mix the ginger with the other filling ingredients and set them aside.

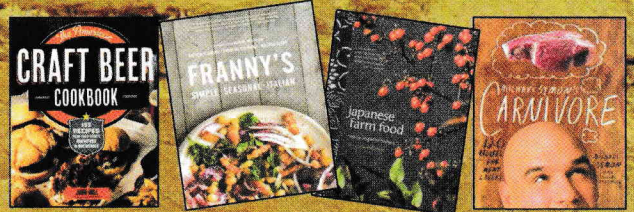
About 45 minutes into the chilling of the crust, preheat the oven to 400°F. Turn your cooked pumpkin or squash purée into a saucepan over medium-high heat for 15 minutes. You won't have to worry too much about the squash burning and sticking, but you will need to stir it every so often. When the pumpkin is quite sticky and reduced, remove the pan from the heat. Combine the hot, twice-cooked pumpkin with the other filling ingredients, pour them immediately into the cold crust and place the pie in the oven.

Bake at 400° for 25 to 30 minutes or until the pastry is golden brown and only a silver-dollar-size circle in the center remains jiggly. Cool the pie thoroughly on a cake rack before cutting.

Photo by Mary Brower

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WINTER SQUASH STRATA WITH GRUYERE AND SAGE

Serves 10 or more.

From Bluestem Farm

Strata is the dish I am going to make every Christmas morning for the rest of my life. The beauty of strata is that you prepare it the night before, which means you can have a clean kitchen when it's time for breakfast—especially great any time you are feeding a crowd. Our friend Amanda Kik introduced us to the wonders of using winter squash in strata.

- 8 ounces bacon, drippings reserved
- 2 medium yellow onions
- 2 cloves garlic
- 5 sage leaves, minced
- 10 cups crusty bread torn into 1-inch chunks
- 2 cups cooked winter squash
- 2 cups cubed Gruyere
- 1 cup grated Parmesan
- 16–20 eggs
- 1 cup milk or cream
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons minced parsley

Grease a 4-quart casserole dish or 9- by 13-inch baking pan. (Strata can be prepared in much larger or smaller amounts to fit the size of your gathering; adjust your pan size accordingly.)

Cook bacon and drain, saving the drippings. Chop onions and garlic and sauté them with sage in 3 tablespoons of the bacon fat. Reserve the rest of the drippings—you'll want to drizzle some or all of it over the top of the dish. When the onions are soft, remove from heat and mix with the bacon, which has been chopped or crumbled.

Rip up pieces of bread to cover the bottom of the casserole dish. As if you were assembling a lasagna, drop in cubes of cheese and dollops of squash. Follow up with some crumbled bacon and onions, another layer of bread and cheese and a few more lumps of squash.

Combine the eggs, milk, parsley and salt, and pour them over the bread. Drizzle more bacon drippings over the top.

Cover the casserole with foil. To make sure no icebergs of unsoaked bread rise above the rest, push the foil down into the custard. You will peel the foil off in the morning. Refrigerate overnight.

In the morning, tent the foil above the pan and preheat the oven to 350°. Bake for 30 minutes, remove the foil to let the top brown and bake for another half hour or so, or until the strata is cooked through. Like a soufflé it will deflate as it cools, so bring it to the table very hot for best effect.

