

THE LIVING IS JUICY

At this time of year I go a little crazy. One might be tempted to say that I take leave of my senses, but in truth I come fully into possession of my senses, or am fully possessed by them, in this gloriously sensual season. I let the sticky nectar of ripe fruit dribble down my chin. I smile with corn in my teeth and a luxurious layer of sweet cream butter shimmering shamelessly across my dimples. My shirtfronts are artfully drip-dyed in shades of pink, red and yellow. I attempt to eat to the exact mid-point between bliss and bellyache.

In the sum-sum-summertime I feel as if I could live on a steady diet of seasonal delights: corn on the cob; squash with sweet onions; new potatoes with butter and parsley; tomatoes with garlic, basil and balsamic vinegar; pickled cucumbers and onions; lightly salted watermelon; peaches and ice cream; strawberry-rhubarb pie and ice cream; or ice cream for its own sake. Every now and again I might get the craving for some protein, perhaps a steak that has been chastely kissed by garlic, salt and pepper and had an ever so brief but memorable assignation with a hot grill. But for the most part I am thoroughly sated by the earthy delights that have sprung from branch, stalk and vine, with very few embellishments.

One hot July afternoon we stopped by Charlie and Betty's place to see what was on offer. Just that day they had harvested five bushels of cucumbers, ten times that amount in sweet corn, and a fair number of tomatoes. The two of them were sitting in their favorite chairs outside the garage, betwixt them a wheelbarrow heaped with corn, shucking and cleaning their own share of the takings, which was destined for the freezer. I don't know what we were thinking, but we only bought half a dozen ears of corn and five pounds of tomatoes. By nightfall we had virtually decimated the whole lot.

Gluttony ought to be stricken from the list of deadly sins during July and August. This bounty from the garden is at the peak of flavor now; it will not wait for those who set a dainty pace of consumption. Three ears of hot buttered corn and two tomatoes at one sitting is not, in my opinion, excessive. One afternoon at five o'clock I ate, on a whim, a piece of strawberry-rhubarb pie, which was so devastatingly tasty that I promptly ate another slice. I did not feel the need to be forgiven. A few hours later I ate a plateful of watermelon, rinsed the plate and reused it for yet another piece of pie. This was my evening meal—not a traditional, civilized adult meal, more like the five-course dinner of a kid left unsupervised for the evening. Every single course was zinging and screaming with a brilliant sweetness to which I enthusiastically abandoned myself, humming a few bars of "No Regrets."

Twenty-four hours after our previous visit, we were back at Charlie and Betty's—for a dozen-and-a-half ears of corn this go-round—and we were not a minute too soon. They'd sold forty dozen ears that day, and had only a half-wheelbarrow-load remaining. Just like that, the corn-on-the-cob season had come and gone; already Charlie had mowed down the stalks. The tomatoes are just getting revved up, however, so we bought another five pounds. As I stood watching Betty weigh the vegetables, I noticed a tiny handwritten sign on a piece of gray duct tape stuck to the refrigerator: *All profits go to the Charlie and Betty Farm.*

Everybody profits is what I was thinking the next morning—and believe me, my chickens were too—as I sat out in the cool breeze next to their pen and shucked the corn, occasionally tossing them the much-coveted corn worms and the sections of ears upon which the colorful inch-long insects had been lazily feasting. Yes, Charlie and Betty profit from all their hard work and know-how, but so do

ten or twenty local households, the raccoons who prowl the garden at night and take their share, the caterpillars whose childhoods are contentedly spent on the developing ears of corn, and the happiest chickens in Kansas.

With such astonishing bounty on hand, this is also the season to think about provisioning for the winter ahead, to gather and wash the dusty Mason jars, to haul down the stockpot and canning kettle, to blanch, peel, chop and simmer the fragrant, radiant harvest. The recipes I follow or invent are an attempt to sneak up on fresh vegetables and herbs at the peak of flavor and trap them in jars—the genie of summer in a magic lamp, released in the depths of winter to grant our wishes for extravagant flavors from another season.



Summer's abundance can be overwhelming. This is the time of year for the prolific *Cucurbita pepo*—the summer squash known to us as zucchini. A Google search with the keywords *zucchini/zucchini* yielded 1.8 million hits, including this recipe:

THE BEST ZUCCHINI RECIPE EVER!

1 bushel zucchini
1 raincoat
1 pair of sunglasses
A moderately fast car

Jane says August is the only month during which rural Methodists lock their cars at church—to prevent exactly the sort of clandestine activity this recipe suggests. According to my calendar, August 8 is *National Sneak Some Zucchini onto Your Neighbor's Porch Day*.

Why is zucchini so easy to grow, so fertile and productive? One answer is that summer squash—along with corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, pumpkins, common beans, and lima beans—is indigenous to the Americas, and therefore well-suited to thrive here. This dependable and versatile vegetable has with its bounty sparked American culinary ingenuity. Thousands of dishes appear to have been named by a Recipe-O-Matic system—begin with Zippy, Zesty or even Zany, then add Zucchini and any one of the following: Bisque, Boat, Bread, Casserole, Cookies, Quiche, Flapjacks, Fries, Fritters, Patties, Pickles, Pie, Pizza, Ratatouille, Relish, Rolls, Salad, Soup or Squares. Zucchini is the only vegetable I can think of that is just as likely to appear under recipe headings for desserts and breads as it is under appetizers and main dishes. As duct tape is to automotive and home repair, the zucchini is to American cookery—any sagging meal can be propped up and held together courtesy of *Cucurbita pepo*.

Despite their foreign origins, cucumbers, which came to our gardens by way of the Far East, are not far behind the zucchini in productivity, as Charlie and Betty will be happy to tell you. This week I've canned sixteen pints of my favorite relish, an old family recipe with which I've taken a few liberties. This year I left my multi-speed, multi-attachment food processor on the shelf and instead lovingly assembled my heirloom *Universal Food & Meat Chopper No. 1* manufactured by Landers Frary & Clark of New Britain, Connecticut. The design for the chopper was first introduced in 1897 and remained unchanged for the next 68 years;



the company went out of business in 1965. This kitchen implement, beautiful in its utilitarian simplicity, was not



passed down to me with written instructions, yet my hands seemed innately to know how to put it together. As I turned the crank with one hand and fed a cucumber into the chopper's shiny maw with the other, each revolution of the handle took me deeper into my childhood, bringing my grandparents back to life and transporting me to familiar kitchens distant in both miles and time. This is pure magic that cannot be had, I am certain, from any machine that plugs into an electrical outlet. I expect my relish to have similar magical properties.

I worry sometimes about the 79 percent of Americans who are living in cities, the bulk of them in urbanized areas with populations over 200,000. The citizens of cities lock their cars all the time, so there's scarcely a chance one of them would ever find two grocery sacks of unsolicited zucchini in the back seat, let alone rise to the challenge of transforming ten or twenty pounds of indigenous squash into hearty meals and fanciful desserts. Lots of metropolitan kids probably wouldn't know a zucchini from a zebu, nor are they likely to have seen vegetables enter the kitchen with stems, roots or dirt intact. How many of them will cook from recipes passed down for generations or own a canning kettle and a clever jar-lifter? What will they do when they want to get in touch with the food memories of their ancestors, as I did by cranking the handle of my Universal Food & Meat Chopper? Will those pathways lead back to gardens, aprons, kitchens and mysterious root cellars or only to grocery store aisles, frozen dinners and the drive-through lane at a fast-food restaurant?

The relationships that deeply nurture and sustain me are those that are most intimate—bricked and mortared by a familiarity and closeness accumulated through personal investment over time. Intuitively I assume the same to be true of food: the greatest sustenance is to be had from ingredients grown close to home by people I know, including myself, and prepared for the larder or the table by loving hands, often with a rather intensive outlay of time and energy.

Consider, for example, a can of commercially-produced chunky tomato sauce versus a jar of similar sauce I've just made here at home. Corporate-scale farming and factory canning result in a product that is perfectly serviceable and indisputably convenient. The ingredient list is similar to mine and the label boasts a guarantee that the tomatoes were vine-ripened. I have no quarrel with this product, which sits on my pantry shelf for emergencies, but as best I can tell, it was made or

shipped from over 1,500 miles away and I know nary a soul involved at any point in its production. By contrast, it would take less than half an hour to drive by and say hello to the four or five persons who grew the garlic, onions and tomatoes in my jars. I raised, picked and chopped the herbs myself. I scalded, peeled and crushed each and every tomato; I diced the onions and minced the garlic. The differences between the two canned tomato products may or may not be nutritional or otherwise measurable, but I am prepared to argue that they are emotional and spiritual, a matter of relationship, of intimacy. How can such intimacy fail to make a difference in the degree of sustenance I derive from my food?

The value of buying locally-produced food is the cornerstone of the community-supported agriculture (CSA) movement. Proponents don't talk much about the spiritual benefits, but they do offer compelling evidence that eating food from close to home offers the best in taste and



freshness, boosts the local economy, helps preserve family farms, promotes better health, and protects the environment. In the United States, commercially-grown food typically travels between 1,500 and 2,500 miles from farm to plate; the "fresh" fruits and vegetables in your grocery store may have spent two weeks in transit. It's not hard to see the measurable advantages of buying closer to home. Ironically, the CSA model, sprouted in New England in 1986, is nearly indistinguishable from the one Charlie and Betty have been using on their farm since 1944.

There is also, I'm delighted to report, a Slow Food movement that has been gathering momentum and members (now at 83,000) since its founding in Italy in 1986. According to the website at www.slowfood.com, the organization "promotes food and wine culture...defends food and agricultural biodiversity worldwide...opposes the standardisation of taste...protects cultural identities tied to food and gastronomic traditions, [and] safeguards foods and cultivation and processing techniques inherited from tradition." This is heartening news to me, although it may seem absurd to the promoters of progress. I believe it bodes well for the future appreciation of my Universal Food & Meat Chopper, but perhaps even more so for my favorite chef's knife, which is the slowest tool, other than a skillfully-knapped piece of our native flint, for chopping vegetables.

Despite these positive trends, which seem a way of circling back to reclaim precious things we jettisoned on our steady march forward, I worry about a dear friend's adult daughter who cannot bear to eat the eggs I sell because they are too rich in flavor by comparison with the commercial eggs to which she is accustomed. I fear for the unquantifiable number of consumers—the other victims of mass-market mediocrity—whose tastes are similar to hers. I fret about everyone settling for sorry substitutes and pale factory facsimiles of real foodstuffs at the apex of freshness.

In the midst of the most abundant season of the year, I wish everyone rich garden earth under fingernails, sweet corn defiantly lodged between teeth, favorite old shirts splashed with vivid tomato stains, a shelf full of magic in Mason jars, and deep roots that tap straight down past bedrock and into the sweetest of summer's life-giving juices.