

[Brandywine Table]

Cookbook Club

WORKING TOGETHER NEVER
TASTED SO GOOD

Laura Muzzi Brennan

TOO MANY COOKS MIGHT SPOIL THE BROTH, BUT THEY work wonders for Kerala fried chicken, Southern-style greens, cabbage-apple slaw and cardamom-spiced carrot cupcakes.

I know this because one snowy night this past March, I witnessed **Coverdale Farm Preserve's** cookbook club in action. As they tackled recipes from Asha Gomez's *My Two Souths: Blending the Flavors of India into a Southern Kitchen*, they swapped cooking tips, shared wine (it's BYOW) and chopped, shredded and breaded with aplomb.

Cookbook club is the brainchild of **Hockessin Book Shelf** owner Rebecca Dowling and Coverdale Farm manager Michele Wales (Coverdale is part of Delaware Nature Society). The two met five years ago when DNS was looking for ways to join forces with local businesses. The collaboration has been trending delicious ever since.

Here's how the club works: Wales and Dowling pick a book and set a date (club usually meets once a season). Then people reserve a spot on the DNS website or by calling the registrar. Cost, which includes the book and dinner, is \$65 for members and \$75 for non-members. The club is capped at 15 people, and spots fill fast.

The night I visited, the group consisted of veteran cookbook

clubbers—including two neighbors, a mother and daughter, a husband and wife—and some first timers like me who felt right at home in this welcoming group.

Meetings begin around the long table in Coverdale's rustic farm classroom. Rebecca passes out the books—some people pick them up in advance at her book shop—and Michele introduces the recipes

she's chosen. Then the group heads downstairs to the kitchen, aprons in hand, and settles in at the cooking station of their choice, while Michele explains what dish will be made at each station.

Michele acts as what I call "conductor de cuisine." Her experience teaching CSA cooking classes and previous role as farm educator are obvious as she demonstrates the chiffonade technique, answers questions and orchestrates what she fondly calls "controlled chaos." Rebecca plays the role of jack-of-all-stations, sailing from group to group, chatting and pinch hitting.

Both Michele and Rebecca are self-professed "cookbook snobs." For the club, they select contemporary books with aesthetic appeal (beautiful photographs and good binding are important!), approachable recipes and a certain ethic. As Michele puts it: "We like books that truly honor the food on their pages, that show a sense of reverence for food because it's so hard to grow."

Not surprisingly, most book choices are vegetable-forward, ideal for showcasing ingredients grown at Coverdale. The club's first book was Deborah Madison's *Vegetable Literacy*. Since then, they've cooked their way through three to four books every year.

Popular titles include Joshua McFadden's *Six Seasons*, *Canal House Cooks Everyday* by Christopher Hirsheimer and Melissa Hamilton, and *Vegan, Vegetarian, Omnivore* by Anna Thomas. The *Food 52* cookbooks are other favorites. This June, they'll dive into *Dinner: Changing the Game*, the latest from *New York Times* writer Melissa Clark.

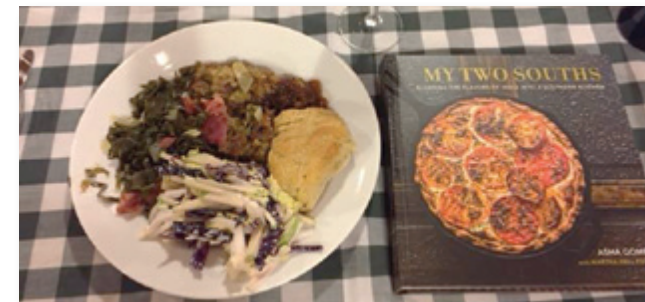
After cooking for two-plus hours, we're back at the long table, feasting, roasting and marveling at the fact that many hands do indeed make light work.



The club enjoys the fruits of their labor at Coverdale Farm Preserve.

Coverdale's take on Mess O'Greens with Ham Hocks and Jalapenos

Asha Gomez's original recipe calls for simmering the greens for 2 hours, but to save time, Michele Wales instructed the cookbook chefs to chiffonade (cut into ribbons) the greens and instead of cooking them all in one huge pot, she used two smaller pots. She also added kale to the original ingredient list.



1½-2 lbs. collard greens
1½-2 lbs. mustard greens
1½-2 lbs. turnip greens
1½-2 lbs. kale
6 jalapenos
6 Tb. butter
6 Tb. olive oil
3 large onions, chopped
6 garlic cloves, finely chopped
3 lbs. smoked ham hocks
4½ tsp. kosher salt
3 tsp. freshly grated nutmeg
9 Tb. cane syrup
1½ C. rice vinegar
Water to cover greens

Remove tough ribs from the leafy greens by folding leaves in half and pulling out or cutting out ribs. Then, to chiffonade the greens, stack leaves on top of each other, roll into a cigar shape and slice crosswise into ½" strips.

Cut jalapenos in half and scrape out seeds with a knife, being careful not to touch seeds. Chop finely.

Add butter and oil to pots and heat over medium heat. Add jalapenos, onions and garlic and cook until onions begin to soften, about 5 minutes. Add all remaining ingredients and just enough water to cover. Stir and bring to a rolling boil.

Cover and cook for about 30 minutes, stirring frequently and replenishing liquid level as needed. After 30 minutes, taste a few ribbons. They're done when they're tender but still have a little snap.

Makes 18 servings.

Note on the next two recipes:

After much anticipation by her adoring public (including me!), Deb Perelman released her second cookbook, *Smitten Kitchen Every Day*, in 2017, and her approachable recipes—and entertaining writing style—make it an ideal choice for cookbook clubs. The tortellini recipe is labor-intensive so it's fun to do with a group. Here are

Secrets to Cookbook Club Success

Want to start a cookbook club with 5 or 10 of your closest friends? Here are Michele Wales' secrets for getting great food on the table while creating camaraderie in the kitchen.

1. Choose books with approachable recipes. Lots of do-ahead steps, sub-recipes and hyper-particular instructions dampen the easygoing vibe and take too much time.
2. Give everyone a job. Since most of us learn better by doing, pick recipes from the perspective of how many people can be involved and for how long.
3. Time it right. Unless you have three ovens and a professional range with 8 burners (lucky for you if you do!), draw up a menu and plan of action that takes into account each dish's cooking time and temperature ... and how many people can stand at your stove at one time! And feel free to tweak the recipe—adapt a cake recipe to cupcakes, for example—to suit your equipment and timeline.
4. Set up stations the smart way. Lay out all the ingredients, bowls and utensils needed to make the recipe. And if two recipes share similar ingredients, place those stations next to each other. If you've got only 1 set of measuring cups or spoons, buy a few more or ask friends to bring their own.
5. Keep the drinks flowing. Cooking is thirsty work, so set out a few pitchers of water or your drink of choice. At Coverdale's club, cooks BYOWine but are always willing to share!

two I've adapted by giving more directions (a la Coverdale's Michele Wales) and a few tweaks to suit my family's taste.

Pea Tortellini

Deb Perelman makes a Parmesan broth to float the tortellini in, but they are just as terrific tossed with butter and sprinkled with Parmesan and mint.



- 1 C. frozen or fresh peas (I used petite frozen)
½ C. whole milk ricotta
½ C. finely grated Parmesan, plus ½ C. or more for serving
½ tsp. kosher salt, plus more to taste
1 Tb. lemon juice
Finely grated lemon zest from 1 small lemon or to taste
65-70 wonton wrappers
12-16 small mint leaves, optional*
2-4 Tb. butter
Freshly ground black pepper



Michele Wales, left, farm manager at Coverdale Farms and Rebecca Dowling, owner of Hockessin Book Shelf



Michele is the "conductor de cuisine" as she settles everyone into their cooking stations.

Pulse peas, ricotta, ½ C. Parmesan, salt, lemon juice and zest until mixed well but not so mixed that you cannot see little pea pieces. You can also add the mint now into the filling, which I like because it puts me in mind of minted pea soup, a springtime favorite. Or save the mint for sprinkling on the finished dish.

Taste and add more lemon, salt and mint if using.
Wonton wrappers usually measure 3–3½” in size, so cut them down into 2½” squares. Dampen a paper towel and place over the wontons to prevent them from drying out as you work. Fill a small bowl with water.



Place a wonton wrapper on your work space. Dip a finger in the water and wet the edges of the wonton. Put a generous ½ tsp. filling in the center. This will look like a paltry amount, and you’ll feel tempted to add more. Don’t! I promise, every tortellini will be satisfying with this small amount.

Fold the wonton in half to form a triangle. Press down to fuse the edges together, pushing out air as you go. Dab all three corners with water. Put the flat side of the filled triangle against your little finger. Wrap the two bottom corners around your finger and fold the top corner down. See photos above.

Place wontons on a parchment-lined baking sheet and put in the freezer for 10 minutes. To save them for later, leave them in the freezer until they’re frozen through, and then place them in a plastic bag or container. They’ll last for a few months, but the freezer might dull their delicate flavors.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add tortellini, a few at a time. Cook for 2–3 minutes, until they float to the top.

At this point, you can either finish the dish the easy way or the super easy way.

Easy Way: Working in batches, melt butter in a large skillet, and using a slotted spoon, scoop tortellini right from the boiling water into the skillet with pasta water clinging to the tortellini. Cook for about 30 seconds until tortellini is coated with butter.

Super easy way: Drain the tortellini and put it in a bowl with a little butter in the bottom and toss.

Whether you choose the easy way or the super easy way, finish tortellini with a generous sprinkling of Parmesan and, if you prefer, a few grinds of black pepper and slivers of mint.

Makes 6–8 servings.

Fennel, Pear, Celery and Hazelnut Salad

I played with the flavor and look of Deb Perelman’s simple winter salad by adding Dijon to the dressing and pomegranate seeds for a tart

garnish—and because they’re just so darn pretty. I also like to replace the Parmesan with little nubbins of Manchego, a Spanish aged sheep’s milk cheese.

- ½ C. hazelnuts
- 1½ lbs. fennel bulbs
- 2 large or 3 small stalks celery
- 1 pear (I used red D’Anjou as Deb does for a nice pop of color.)
- 3 Tb. lemon juice plus more for squeezing on right before serving
- 3 Tb. extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- ½ oz. chunk of Parmesan or Manchego, shaved or cut into nubbins
- ¼ C. pomegranate seeds



Preheat the oven to 350°. Spread hazelnuts on a baking sheet and roast for 10–15 minutes until skins start to blister and crack. Place hazelnuts in a dishtowel and let steam for a minute or two. Then roll them around in the dishtowel to release the skins. (It’s like a warm hand massage.)

Once most of the skins are off, let the hazelnuts cool. Then, place them in a resealable plastic bag and gently pound them with a mallet until they’re in small pieces.

Cut off the fennel fronds and discard or save for another use. Slice bulbs thinly, about an ⅛”. Slice celery into ¼” pieces. Remove core and slice pear thinly.

Make the dressing by whisking together 3 Tb. lemon juice, olive oil, Dijon mustard, salt and pepper to taste.

Toss dressing with fennel and celery and let sit for 5–10 minutes. Add pear, cheese, hazelnuts and toss again. Taste and add a few more squeezes of lemon if you like. Garnish with pomegranate seeds.

Makes 4–6 servings.

Three Spice Carrot Cupcakes

Asha Gomez’s original recipe makes a two-layer cake, but in the interest of time, Michele changed the recipe to cupcakes. Right before the club met, she ground the spices in a spice grinder, and their freshness elevated the entire recipe. For the green cardamom, she ground the whole pods into a fine loose powder. For the Tellicherry peppercorns, she ground them on the coarse side but not so coarse that someone would bite down on a fiery chunk of pepper!

- For the cupcakes:*
- 6–8 carrots, peeled (enough for 3 C.)
 - Butter for greasing muffin tins
 - 3½ C. all-purpose flour
 - 1 Tb. baking powder
 - 1½ tsp. baking soda
 - 1 Tb. fresh coarsely ground Tellicherry black peppercorns (see headnote)
 - 2 tsp. ground cloves
 - 2 Tb. fresh ground green cardamom (see headnote)
 - 2 C. granulated sugar
 - 9 large eggs, at room temperature
 - 1¾ C. canola or vegetable oil

- For the icing:*
- 1½ lbs. cream cheese, at room temperature
 - 16 Tb. (1 C.) butter, at room temperature
 - 2½ C. confectioner’s sugar
 - 1 Tb. fresh coarsely ground Tellicherry black peppercorns (see headnote)
 - 1 Tb. ground green cardamom
 - 1 tsp. ground cloves

Preheat oven to 350°. Grease two 12-well muffin tins with butter.

Use the smallest holes on a box grater to grate carrots.

Mix flour, baking powder and baking soda together. Stir in pepper, cloves and cardamom.

Using a mixer, whip the sugar and eggs together until light and fluffy. With mixer running, add oil in a steady stream.

Add dry ingredients to wet ingredients and mix for 3 minutes. Add carrots and mix until incorporated.

Fill cupcake wells a very generous half full. Bake for 25 minutes or until a toothpick poked in the center of the cupcake comes out clean.

Allow to cool for 15 minutes in the pan. Then, release from the pan and allow to cool completely.

To make the icing, beat cream cheese and butter together on medium speed until smooth, 3–5 minutes. Add confectioner’s sugar, pepper, cardamom and clove a little at a time until blended, 3–4 minutes.

When cupcakes are completely cool, spread with icing.

Note: we ate the cupcakes within a half hour of when they were iced, but if you are not

going to eat them for a few hours, refrigerate.
Makes 24 cupcakes. ♦

Laura traces her love of all things culinary to the first time she leafed through her mother’s Betty Crocker’s Cooky Book—which still occupies a place of honor among her 700+ cookbooks. A passionate supporter of local food, she co-founded a farmers market, judges area food contests, and anticipates restaurant openings with the excitement most people reserve for winning a Mega Millions jackpot.



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