

## Brandywine Table

# Cultivating Community

## HOW ONE CHESTER COUNTY FARM IS BRINGING LOCAL FOOD, CHEFS AND PEOPLE TOGETHER.

Alyssa Thayer

IT'S A WARM SUMMER NIGHT IN THE LUSH, ROLLING hills of the Brandywine Valley. The doors of a historic 17th-century barn are propped open revealing long communal tables lined with beautiful rustic settings. Delectable smells waft from large grills and festive strings lights drape the sky.

This magical evening is part of the Field to Fork series put on by **SIW Vegetables** in Chadds Ford. The dinners pair farm-fresh ingredients with local chefs for a multi-course culinary experience. "It gives a chance for chefs to show off their skills outside of a restaurant environment," says H. G. Haskell III, owner, farmer and idea machine behind the whole SIW operation.

The property (Hill Girt Farm) was originally purchased in 1910 to be used as a Guernsey dairy farm. By 1986 the cows had been sold and HG graduated with a degree in agriculture business—it was time for him to create his own vision for the land.

"I was sure I didn't want to be a dairy farmer," he chuckles, "that's a 365 day a year job." So, he decided to grow vegetables instead. In year one, the farm grew just 5 varieties of vegetables on 6 acres. Now, they're growing 50 varieties on 50 acres.

Since taking over, HG has continued to innovate and expand—



Innovation spurred H. G. Haskell III, owner of SIW Vegetables, to create a good food destination.

opening a seasonal farmstand, running a weekly CSA and hosting the Field to Fork dinners in the barn. And when someone has a new idea or asks to collaborate, the answer is almost always "yes."

When a member of the SIW Veggie Recipe Facebook Group mentioned a love of burdock root, HG bought the seeds and added burdock to the growing plan. When Chefs Gerald Allen and Natalie Eguez lost work due to the pandemic, they became a permanent part of the SIW family, creating weekly smoked dinners that could be pre-ordered and picked up at the farmstand.

The Field to Fork dinners are an extension of that same ethos of building community and connecting people to their food. "They started as annual potluck dinners for our CSA members to celebrate the end of the season," says HG.

Even as the Field to Fork dinners became more established, and the chefs higher profile, the dinners never lost their original purpose or communal feel. The dishes are served family-style and the menu is dictated by whatever is available on the farm.

The recipes in this month's column share that same mission—they are delicious, use what's in season, and are best enjoyed among good company. Cheers!



Chef Gerald Allen at the grill



Open through Halloween, selling fresh produce, artisan local food, potted succulents and more



Field to Fork dinners bring local chefs, seasonal ingredients and food fans together.

### Backyard Summer Recipes

Gerald says the best part of the weekly smoked dinners is that they provide him with a creative outlet. This inspiration makes its way onto the plate with bold, flavorful sauces and rubs that can pretty much go on anything.

#### Chermoula Sauce

Originally from Morocco, this flavorful herb sauce can be used as a marinade or condiment. According to Gerald, it's perfect with "anything summery" including grilled meats, fish and grilled veggies.



- 1 C. fresh cilantro leaves, chopped
- 1 C. fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves, chopped
- 1 tsp. fresh thyme leaves
- 2 tsp. fresh ginger, grated
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- ¼ tsp. kosher salt
- ½ tsp. Aleppo chili flakes
- ½ tsp. ground coriander
- ½ tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. rice wine vinegar
- ½ lemon, zested and juiced
- ½ C. extra-virgin olive oil

Combine all the ingredients, except olive oil, using one of the following methods: grind with mortar and pestle (most traditional), mince finely by hand, or chop with a food processor. *Note:* Blenders are *not* the best tool for this job since the goal is to chop not blend.

Once everything has been minced/ground into a uniform mixture, transfer to a bowl and stir in the olive oil.

Makes 1 cup of sauce.

*Note:* As tempting as it is to just add the oil right into the food processor with the herbs and aromatics, Gerald warns against doing that because it changes the taste and texture of the sauce.

#### Watermelon and Heirloom Tomato Salad with Feta

- ½ small/medium watermelon, cubed
- 1 heirloom tomato, sliced or cut into wedges
- ½ C. basil leaves, chopped
- 3 Tb. olive oil
- 2 Tb. red wine vinegar

### Perfect Picks:

Late summer is showtime for PA produce. Crowd-pleasers like melons, corn and tomatoes top market tables begging to be brought home and enjoyed.

Here are a few tips and tricks to help you select and store the best of the bunch:

**Watermelon** – A ripe watermelon should feel heavy for its size, sound hollow when you knock, and have a yellow patch, indicating it was ripened in the field. The rind should be hard and not too shiny.

**Cantaloupe** – A ripe cantaloupe should smell fragrant and be firm but not hard. It should also be a nice shade of light tan, not green, with visibly raised ridges all over the skin. It shouldn't have any remnant of the stem since it separates easily from the vine when harvested ripe.

**Tomatoes** – There's nothing quite like a vine-ripened tomato. Ones found at the grocery store are often picked before peak ripeness to allow for longer storage and easier handling. HG recommends getting them as locally as possible, and that of course includes your own backyard! Storage: keep them at room temperature on a sill or counter, never in the fridge, as the cooler temperature can turn the texture mealy.

**Corn** – Although newer varieties of corn may be stored for slightly longer, HG recommends eating sweet corn ASAP after it's harvested. As time elapses, sugars from the corn become starchier, affecting the taste and texture. Slow that process by storing in the fridge. SIW harvests corn multiple times a day to keep the farmstand stocked with the freshest ears possible.

**Peaches** – A golden yellow hue means the fruit has been allowed to sweeten up in the sun. The skin should be wrinkle-free and have some give when pressed. Look for a sign or ask your market/farmers which have been tree-ripened, because there's really no comparison. Allow to ripen fully on the counter before storing uncovered and unwashed in the crisper drawer of the fridge.

**Fresh Herbs** – Fresh herbs are one of the best parts of summer cooking, whether you buy them at a market or get them from your CSA. To keep them from wilting, store soft herbs (parsley, mint, cilantro) upright, with stems in a water glass and a plastic bag over top. Store hard herbs (rosemary, thyme, oregano) in the fridge in a dry bag with a slightly damp towel wrapped around the ends.

**Lima Beans** – While HG acknowledges that lima beans aren't usually on the top of most people's shopping list, SIW's exceptionally fresh and unique heirloom varieties might change your mind. He says they are best when freshly picked, not overly big, and only need to cook for 1 minute in boiling water.

- 5 oz. block feta, cubed
- ½ tsp. flake sea salt
- ½ tsp. fresh cracked black pepper

In a large bowl add watermelon, tomatoes, basil, olive oil, vinegar, and feta. Toss to combine.

Plate mixed salad, add mixture on top, then top with salt and pepper to taste.

Serves 2.



### Charred Zucchini, Squash Blossom and Heirloom Tomato Salad

*This recipe brings the best of summer into one salad. Can't find squash blossoms (sometimes harder to get in late in the summer)? No problem—the flavors and textures will still be sensational without them.*

- 2 medium-sized zucchinis, halved or quartered
- 6 squash blossoms
- 2 Tb. olive oil
- 1 heirloom tomato, sliced or cut into wedges
- Salt and pepper to taste (or 2 tsp. Gerald's famous Spud Spice, recipe available online)
- 1 Tb. of Chermoula Sauce



Start with a cast-iron skillet on medium-high heat. In a bowl, toss the zucchini, squash blossoms and olive oil together. First sear the zucchini for about 1 minute on first side, then add squash blossoms. Flip to sear zucchini on other side for 1 minute or until crispy. Once cooled, season with Spud Spice or salt and pepper. Lay each item onto a plate or shallow bowl and top with Chermoula Sauce. Serves 2. *Note:* For the “Spud Spice” that Gerald says will change your life, head to our website's post for August's Brandywine Table.

### Smoky Grilled Chicken Thighs

*While most of us don't have an industrial-size smoker at home, adding some smoked paprika (aka pimenton) to your dry rub can help develop some of that rich smoky flavor we know and love. Dry rubs, just like sauces, are great because you can make a whole bunch and use it on just about any protein!*



- Spice Rub:*
- 2 Tb. smoked paprika
  - ½ tsp. hot paprika
  - 1 Tb. salt
  - 2 tsp. garlic powder
  - 2 tsp. cumin
  - 2 tsp. ground pepper (black or red will work)
  - 1 Tb. brown sugar

- Chicken:*
- 4-lb. bone-in chicken thighs
  - ½ C. parsley, roughly chopped

Make dry rub first by mixing all ingredients together and storing in an airtight container. (Rub will last at room temperature for up to a month and is great on seafood, poultry or grilled eggplant.) Rinse chicken and pat dry. Place onto a large tray and sprinkle liberally with dry rub mixture. Flip the chicken over and repeat on the other side. Once well coated with seasoning (should be mostly a red/rust color), cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or up to 6 hours. Pull chicken from the fridge and allow to warm to room temperature (15 minutes). Preheat the grill to 400° F. Place chicken on the hot grill skin-side-down and cook over medium heat for 10 minutes (if working with a gas grill, keep flames directly under chicken a bit lower to avoid flare ups, as the sugar in rub will burn). Carefully flip each piece and grill for 10 minutes more or until internal temperature reaches 165° F. Pull chicken off the grill, finish with a pinch or two of coarse salt and allow it to rest for 10–15 minutes before serving. Top with chopped parsley once the chicken has cooled slightly. Serve with any of your favorite grilled summer veggies. Serves 6–8.

### Don't Forget the Figs ...

*We'd be remiss not to mention SIW's figs as part of this piece. They are a true labor of love since HG admits the farm sits about 100 miles too far north for the trees to truly thrive. But that doesn't stop him from trying. This delicious recipe is from Field to Fork veteran Ari Miller, chef/owner of Philly's Musi & Frizwit.*

### Cardamom-Scented Malabi with Fresh Figs

*Malabi is a traditional Israeli milk pudding that provides a creamy accompaniment to the fresh figs.*



- ½ C. heavy cream
- 3½ Tb. cornstarch
- 1½ C. whole milk
- 4 Tb. sugar
- 8 cardamom pods, crushed

- ¼ tsp. vanilla extract
- Pinch of kosher salt
- 2 fresh figs, sliced into halves or thirds

Whisk together cream and cornstarch in a small bowl to form a slurry and set aside. Add milk, sugar, cardamom, vanilla and a pinch of salt to the saucepan and heat over medium flame till just before it simmers. Strain out cardamom pods and return to low heat. Whisk in the cream and cornstarch mixture and return heat to medium. Continue to whisk constantly until the mixture thickens to the consistency of pudding.

Turn out mixture into single-serving ramekins, slice or rip figs into halves or thirds and rest on top of the malabi, gently pushing it into the surface.

Cover with plastic wrap and place in the fridge to cool and set (at least 45 minutes).

Garnish with something nice, like a drizzle of honey or some crushed tea biscuits.

Serves 8. ♦

*Alyssa Thayer found her love of food at an early age, frolicking around her mother's organic farm and eating her weight in berries and snap peas each summer. She is a self-proclaimed urban farm girl, whose mission is to bring inspired ideas to life, passionate people together, and good food to every table.*



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