

Brandywine Table

Think Outside the (Lunch) Box

LOCAVORE-MINDED CHEF OFFERS A FRESH APPROACH TO PREPARED FOODS AND MAKE-AHEAD MEALS.

Alyssa Thayer



Chef John creating a field-to-feast dinner at Rushton Farm

SEPTEMBER MEANS BACK TO ROUTINE. A TIME when we trade in carefree summer grazing for something a bit more orchestrated. And while planning our meals may sound onerous at the outset, it doesn't have to be.

Chef John Alff of *Vesta Kitchen* in Phoenixville says his menus are inspired by what is available, "I like to actually go to the store or farmers market and see what ingredients jump out at me. It gets the wheels turning on what I can create."

Originally from Bucks County, John says his food journey began in a hometown pizza joint before winding its way through some of the best-known restaurants in Philly (including Percy St. BBQ and Barbuzzo). Ultimately, he and his wife decided to trade the fast-paced city life for something a bit more family-centric and found their way out to the Phoenixville area.

John's passion for seasonal, local ingredients led him straight to the Phoenixville Farmers Market, where he quickly developed relationships with the growers and producers. He was especially taken with the fresh-baked bread from St. Peter's Bakery. "I asked the owner one day if I could come hang out and learn to make bread." The owner agreed, eventually making him part of the team.

A couple of years later, when the farmers market needed a hot food vendor, John decided it was time to start his own business. With little more than a smoker trailer, folding tables and a tent,

Vesta was born. John began by selling hot breakfast sandwiches and smoked meats on weekends. He chuckles remembering the early days. "I was renting out a church kitchen, working around youth groups and bridge club," he says.

Eventually, John met the folks behind Partners Creating Community, an umbrella organization for three mission-driven artisan food companies in Chester County. He loved their energy and mission and began subleasing their kitchen space in Franklin Commons.

By the time the pandemic hit in early 2020, John had developed quite a following. In an effort to stay afloat while staying safe, he pivoted his business online and offered contactless local deliveries. While order volume was down, sales remained steady, thanks to larger orders with a wider variety of dishes.

Also during this time, John began processing and preserving large quantities of seasonal produce and developed a new line of small-batch pantry products (most notably his fermented hot sauces).

Today, John's amazing food and sauces can be found all over town, including prepared salads and sandwiches at the newly opened Red Dog Market in Pottstown and various pop-ups and caterers throughout the region.

Check out these recipes and tips, plus more at *CountyLinesMagazine.com*, to make your transition to fall cooking more delectable.



Chef John serving at Rushton Farm dinner

John and smoker at Vesta BBQ & Catering at the Phoenixville Farmers Market in 2018.

Sauces and Spreads

While we're closing the chapter on summer, our gardens and fields are far from finished. Ingredients like peppers, onions and fresh herbs abound and can add vibrance and flavor to almost any dish.

Roasted Pepper Romesco

This vibrant, savory spread is delicious over a grilled protein or slathered liberally onto crusty bread. It's a great way to preserve the pepper season, and it can be saved in the fridge or frozen for later use.

Makes 2-3 cups

3-5 dried chilies (John recommends guajillo or nora), stemmed and seeded

2 or 3 slices stale bread, torn into smaller pieces

6-8 cloves garlic

6 roasted red peppers, peeled and seeded

2 T. vinegar (preferably Tawny Rose, Merlot or Black Garlic vinegar from Keepwell Vinegar, made in PA)

1-2 T. honey, local if possible

1 T. salt, plus more to taste

1/2 C. good-quality olive oil

1 1/2 T. smoked paprika

1 C. toasted almonds, pulsed in food processor until finely chopped (although not all the way into flour or paste)



Place dry chilies in a container with a tight-fitting lid, pour boiling water over peppers until they're submerged and stay submerged when the lid is placed on the container. Allow chilies to steep in water for 45-60 minutes or longer, until they're rehydrated and soft.

When chilies are steeped, remove from the water and set aside. Reserve the liquid.

Place bread pieces in the food processor and pour enough chili liquid over bread to soften it.

Add garlic, roasted peppers, vinegar, honey, rehydrated chilies, salt, olive oil and smoked paprika to the food processor and buzz into a sauce until all ingredients are incorporated. If the sauce is too thick, add more chili liquid to achieve desired consistency.

Place sauce in a bowl and fold in the almonds.

Build It Better

Picking flavor-filled ingredients is the first step, but making them hold up until you eat them is the second. Take a look at these tips for optimal lunchtime enjoyment:

Box It Up: Bento box-style containers are popular for a reason. They allow each part of the meal to have its own compartment, preventing unwanted sliding and smushing.

Temp Tolerant: Some foods can be served warm, cold or even at room temperature. Dishes such as sesame noodles, roasted veggies and falafel are all easy to enjoy at any temp.

Bring on the Batches: Some items — including meatballs, soups, veggie burgers and quiche — can be made in large quantities and then frozen for later. Not only is this a great time saver, it means you can spread out your enjoyment and give yourself variety.

Sturdier Salads: While the age-old trick of "dressing on the side" is recommended for delicate green salads, there are some greens and veggies that actually get better as they sit in the sauce! These include kale, cabbage and other non-leaf veggies like broccoli, corn and carrots.

Second Day Stars: Some foods actually taste BETTER the second time around. These include many chilies and stews, curries, lasagna and shredded meats.

Serve as a garnish to seafood, meat or grilled veggies, or just eat as a dip. Will keep in the refrigerator for one week or can be frozen.

Fermented Hot Sauce

When you have a surplus of peppers at the end of the summer and need to preserve them, fermentation just might be the ticket! Follow this simple recipe to get the most of your peppers and preserve them for the off-season. You may notice this recipe is in grams and uses a bit of math, but don't let this scare you. If you're interested in fermentation, this is the best way to get started!



Peppers, any variety

****Note:** if using extremely hot peppers, it's good to wear gloves and work in a well-ventilated area

3% kosher salt

Vinegar, preferably from Keepwell Vinegar (They have a wide variety of PA-sourced vinegars to choose from.)

Aromatics (garlic or fresh herbs) (optional)

Stem all your peppers. Remove seeds if you want to, but not necessary. Place in a food processor and buzz until thoroughly chopped but not pureed. Place all chopped peppers in a bowl and add aromatics (optional) and weigh the contents in grams.

Multiply your pepper weight by .03. This is how much salt you will need. (For example, if you have 500 grams of peppers, then you need 15 grams of salt.) Mix the salt thoroughly into the bowl of chopped peppers and let sit for 15–20 minutes.

Transfer the pepper/salt mixture to a clean fermentation vessel and seal with a lid that has an air lock.

Store in a dark place in your home that's around 65–75° for 3 to 4 weeks.

You now have fermented peppers! If you used any fresh herbs, take them out and discard them. Taste it!

You could now blend the contents of your jar into hot sauce if you like. Add some vinegar to the blender to achieve desired thickness, passing the mixture through a fine-mesh sieve or strainer for a smoother consistency.

Other uses include adding to salad dressings, mixing with mayo for a spicy condiment or creating a pepper relish. Store in a tightly-sealed container in the refrigerator for months.

Second Time Around Classic Chicken Salad

One of the best ways to eat well during a busy week is to reinvent your leftovers. Next time you have leftover cooked chicken or turkey, try whipping up a batch of this delicious chicken salad. Or take a shortcut and start with store-bought rotisserie chicken.

****Note:** Amounts are given as a range so you can up the creaminess of the mayo or the crunchiness of the celery.



1 lb. chicken yields about 3 C. of chicken salad (serves 2)

1–2 lbs. roast chicken, picked off the bones and diced

½–¾ C. mayo

3 T. whole grain mustard

3 T. Dijon mustard

3–4 stalks celery, diced small

Salt and pepper to taste (depends how seasoned the chicken was)

Add mayo, mustards and a pinch of salt and pepper to a medium bowl and mix until combined. Add in chicken and celery and mix again.

Once evenly coated, taste and add extra mayo or salt and pepper to achieve desired taste and consistency.

Enjoy as a sandwich, wrap or atop a bed of green salad as a quick dinner or lunch during the week.

Fall Soup

It's hard to say goodbye to summer, but savory fall flavors make the transition a bit easier. The best part of this recipe is that it can be made



with whatever hard squash is available. "Butternut, acorn and kabocha will all work, but Long Island Cheese Squash from Hill Creek Farm is my favorite," says John.

Makes 3 quarts of soup, enough for 4–6 people

6 sprigs thyme

2 sprigs rosemary

6–8 fresh sage leaves

4 bay leaves

3 T. whole coriander seeds

¼ C. olive oil

2 medium yellow or white onions, chopped

10 cloves garlic

½ C. ginger, peeled and chopped (or 4 T. dry ground ginger)

1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper

5 lbs. squash, peeled, seeded and cut into 2-inch chunks

2 lbs. carrots, peeled and cut into 1-inch pieces

2 qt. vegetable stock

3 T. kosher salt

Garnish with toasted pepitas

Wrap thyme, rosemary, sage, bay leaf and coriander seeds in cheesecloth and tie with twine to make a sachet.

Heat oil over medium-high heat in a large pot big enough to hold all ingredients. When oil is hot and shimmering, add onion, garlic, ginger, salt and black pepper and sauté the onions, stirring frequently, until soft and translucent. A little bit of color or caramelization is okay, as that will deepen the flavor of the soup.

Add the herb sachet and continue stirring until you begin to smell the fragrance of the aromatics.

Add the squash, carrots and vegetable stock. Add more stock or water to make sure all ingredients are submerged and bring to a simmer, stirring occasionally.

After about 15 minutes, start checking the squash for tenderness. (You want it to be soft to the touch, but not falling apart.) When squash and carrots are cooked, remove from heat and allow to cool for 10–15 minutes. Strain the contents into a colander, saving cooking liquid. Discard the sachet.

Working in batches, add the squash/carrot mixture to your blender with some of the reserved cooking liquid and blend until smooth. You may need to add more cooking liquid to get the desired consistency.

Pour soup into a large container and continue blending in batches until all soup is blended. Taste and whisk in additional salt to taste.

This soup will keep in the refrigerator for up to a week, and it also freezes very well.

****Tip:** Think about freezing in smaller containers if you would like to use it for lunches.

Cornbread

Nothing says fall like a hunk of hearty cornbread next to your bowl of soup. "This recipe is the perfect amount to fill a 12-inch cast iron pan, or sometimes I make it in a mini muffin pan for my kids," says John.



****Note:** This recipe can be made with flour and cornmeal from the grocery store, but if you have access to freshly milled wheat and corn, there's a noticeable difference in the final product. I source my flour and cornmeal from Castle Valley Mill in Doylestown. Also, the recipe can be doubled.

Serves 4-6

½ lb. (1 C.) butter, plus a little extra to prepare pans (or you can use nonstick spray)

1¼ C. freshly milled flour (all purpose or bread)

1½ C. freshly milled cornmeal (yellow is fine; John prefers a mixture of red and yellow corn)

2 T. baking powder

¼ C. sugar

1 T. kosher salt

1¾ C. buttermilk

2 T. local honey

2 eggs

For Jalapeño-Cheddar Cornbread:

1 jalapeño, seeded and chopped (optional)

½ C. sharp cheddar cheese, diced into small cubes (optional)

Preheat oven to 375°. Use low fan if in a convection oven.

Melt butter over low heat and set aside for about 10–15 minutes while you mix other ingredients.

Whisk the flour, cornmeal, baking powder, sugar and salt together in a large bowl.

In a separate bowl, whisk buttermilk, honey and eggs together until completely mixed.

Mix the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients until fully incorporated.

Whisk in the melted butter, making sure it's not too hot when you mix it in. You can also mix in the jalapeños now if making jalapeño-cheddar cornbread.

Use a spatula to pour the batter into an oiled cast iron pan or muffin tins. If making jalapeño-cheddar cornbread, gently push the cubes of cheddar into the batter, 1 or 2 cubes per muffin or about 2 inches apart if making in a cast iron pan. Use a spoon to cover the cheddar cubes with batter.

Bake in oven for 25 minutes, then check for doneness. When a cake tester or sharp knife poked into middle comes out clean and there's a nice golden brown crust on top, you know it's done. If not, continue baking, checking again in 5–7 minutes.

Remove cornbread from your pan and serve warm, with some butter melted on top.

Cornbread will keep in the fridge for up to a week or in the freezer. Reheat in a 300° oven. Or cut into cubes and toast on a sheet tray in a 375° oven to make cornbread croutons! ♦

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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