

Cookin' Catskills

A Regional Cuisine Evolves

By Karin Edmondson



Highland Premium Venton in Germantown, one of the many farms in the Catskill Region and Hudson Valley that are contributing the food to an emerging Catskill Cuisine. Photo by Karin Edmondson

Early on in my first forays into journalism of the musical sort (far from sun, farm and field) that required frequent, hedonistic trips to venues along Sunset Boulevard or much-coveted entries onto tour buses in order to interview bands in various stages of alcoholic besottment, I learned a valuable lesson. No one—whether rock star or chef (although today, these two terms could be synonymous)—likes to be pigeonholed or compared to any one or anything else. In this case, each band had a unique sound that they'd "prefer" not be comparative. Pure, unadulterated originality is rare, if at all existent. History, precedent, custom, tradition, classic, collective consciousness and then—personal predilections formed by nature or nurture or the crazy aunt in Dubuque—all conspire against unadulterated anything. Further dissolution is perpetrated by the current obsession with a global economy. Cultural identity is muddied by imports and exports. Even trenchant superpowers determined to prevent cultural sullification find their defenses constantly breached by pop culture (usually America's cultural myth and mystique) and fast food. What we eat and how we eat it are hot topics. Buzzwords: food security, organic, local, slocal, regional, terroir, slow food, fast food, clean food, carbon imprint. In 1989 Carlo

Petrini and a band of like-minded Italian citizens protested the opening of a McDonald's in a favorite piazza in Rome and eventually formed Slow Food, an international non-profit eco-gastronomic movement devoted to preserving local farm traditions through biodiversity, sustainable food supply, local producers, heritage foodways—heritage breeds of animals and heirloom varieties of produce—and rediscovery of the pleasures of the table. Today there is Slow Food International, Slow Food USA and no less than eleven convivia in NY State including Slow Food Hudson Valley and Slow Food Catskills. Impressive. Two convivia in an area that is approximately 12,000 square miles. Only California outnumbers New York State in local chapters and Alaska, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont and Wyoming only have one convivium per state. Are the Hudson Valley and Catskill Region particularly fertile farm regions? Yes. Do they have a rich agricultural history? Yes. Does New York City supply an inordinate amount of educated, food focused—some might say obsessively preoccupied—folks that provide a market? Yes. Is there a cuisine that is particularly endemic to the region? Perhaps.

There is evidence of an emerging, evolving Catskill Cuisine: an amalgamation, happy melding of past and present, of regional and worldly. Look around. There are numerous restaurants that advertise a sort of local, seasonal cooking. Slow Down Food Company in Andes: "the bounty of our local Farms at our café," Aroma-Thyme Bistro in Ellenville: "organic and gluten-free ingredients," Annie's Bread and Butter in Oncontra: "Specializing in Regional Fare," Beso in New Paltz: "Fresh, modern American cuisine, seasonally inspired by local Hudson Valley farmers," the Andes Hotel in Andes: "an inventive regularly changing menu focusing on the best the region has to offer," Miss Lucy's Kitchen in Saugerties: "farmhouse restaurant and bar with a daily market menu featuring local meats and produce," Amy's Take-away in Lanesville "Uncommonly delicious, seasonal food" and my favorite wording at Peekamoose in Big Indian: "Silly local name. Serious local food."

What is local Catskill cuisine? Can it be defined (yet)?

Catskill Cuisine: What Is Native?

The Catskill Region contains some of the most elemental landscapes and riotous climactic effervescence in the Northeast. Weather can change in minutes—clouds roil in, blocking glorious sun and stirring placid forests into lashing frenzies with dramatic wind, slanting rain. In other instances, fog or thick cloud cover suddenly evaporates and melts away like sheer fabric pulled right over intense heat, to reveal a plump and silver moon hovering closer to the earth than usual. This is not land that supports lemon or olive trees; rather it offers hardy, tenacious plant materials intensities of rain, sun, wind and a relatively short growing season in which to get on with living and producing. The coddled should seek elsewhere for a home.

Any discussion of native species—plant or animal—must consider layers of inhabitation and cultural succession. How native is native? At what point does an exotic, through cultural assimilation (the apple, the tomato) become solidly embedded in gastronomic and cultural tradition and thus considered native or of the place? Ponder the tomato. In the United States, especially certain sections of Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, and in Southern Italy the tomato is the absolute essence of national cuisine and thereby, cultural identity. New Jersey proudly declared the tomato the state's Official Vegetable—with nary a regard that it is actually a fruit. Italian cultural identity (and subsequent American glamorizing in *The Godfather* trilogy) owes everything to the tomato, which is, in fact, native to Mexico. "*Lycopersicon esculentum*, belonging to the same family as its compatriots the potato and tobacco, grew in Mexico and the countries of South America." (Toussaint-Samat, Maguelonne. *The History of Food*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books. p. 707). The pumpkin's botanical home is South and Central America and owes its starring role in Halloween celebrations to conquistadors and migrating tribes. The Europeans are responsible for the apple nearly edging out the American Eagle for the symbol of American



A bean pole fence at Stone & Thistle Farm in East Meredith.
Photo by Karin Edmondson

wholesomeness, even though apples are only truly native to Kazakhstan. Attempting to decipher native from long-term cultivated and integral to the collective regional cuisine must vex even the most ardent food historian or horticulturalist. Plants are different from crops. Crops signify cultivation. Plants that are forested or foraged have been left to their own devices in field or forest. In the Catskills, these include: fiddleheads, ginseng, garlic ramps, garlic mustard, mushrooms, tiger lilies, mustards, purslane, nettle, wood sorrel, ginger and forbs. These plants thrive in forested, damp, fertile, humus-rich environments. The Native Americans who first inhabited this region farmed the rich alluvial floodplains of the numerous rivers that perambulate through the region. Their main crops were the "three sisters" of maize (corn), beans and squash: all three, incidentally, were introduced to North America from Central and South America. Ditto with the aforementioned pumpkin and tobacco. American Indians also regularly burned forested lands to provide for better hunting but also, to aid in speedy propagation of edible nut trees: oaks, hickories and chestnut are some of the first trees to colonize a burned or degraded site. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Europeans brought with them the apple,



Photo by Dana Matthews

that ubiquitous symbol of the United States. The apple is only native to one country in the world, and on these shores is referred to as cultivated non-native. Cauliflower which was at one point widely grown in the Catskills and was first cultivated in Margaretville in 1891, but is native to Cyprus. Wild harvested blueberries and huckleberries are native and there are “both found in the Catskills but blueberries have always been far more common and widely distributed” (Kudish, Michael. *The Catskill Forest: A History*. Fleischmanns: Purple Mountain Press, 2000. p. 49.). Blueberries can either be forested—picked in the wild—or cultivated native—grown on farms.

Now, livestock. “Most of the agricultural lands in the Catskills have been devoted to pasture because pastures can climb higher on the slopes than cropland...the shallower and stonier soils, steeper slopes, and the shorter growing season which coincides with greater elevation are conducive only to pasture.” (Kudish, Michael. *The Catskill Forest: A History*. p. 54.) Following the American Indian precedent, “crop lands require the best sites, the floodplains.” Pasture conjures up images of cattle and “it is true that dairy, to a lesser extent beef, cattle were a large component of grazing livestock in the Catskills but there were other animals as well...sheep were important to the early settlers. Most farms produced their own wool which was then made into clothing by the farmers wives...a large portion of pastureland was devoted to sheep.” (Kudish, Michael. *The Catskill Forest: A History*. p. 55) “Pigs came ashore mainland North America in 1539 when Hernando De Soto brought them from Cuba—where thirteen year prior Columbus had deposited his 8 pigs, as indicated by his cargo manifest—to the Southeastern United States.” (Kaminsky, Peter. *Pig Perfect*. New York: Hyperion, 2005. p. 130.) So while perhaps not entirely blue-blooded, Pleistocene-native, after 500 years in this country, the pig is assuredly more native than most of this country’s meat-consuming population. Buffalo are native to North America as are certain species of deer, white tailed being the most abundant.

So—a partial list of what could be considered native Catskill foods: ginseng, garlic ramps, garlic mustard, mushrooms, tiger lilies, mustards, purslane, nettle, wood sorrel, ginger, forbs, beans, squash, corn, nuts, berries, apples, beef, lamb, pork, venison.

Catskill Cuisine: Purist & Historical?

The current revitalization of farming in the region is due to small scale farmers finding alternative agricultural production uses for unprofitable and abandoned dairy farms. Heirloom vegetables and pastured heritage breeds of meat animals are the two most common. Hand in Hand Organic Farm in Hobart, RSK Farm in Prattsville, Stoneledge Farm in Cairo, Lucky Dog Farm in Hamden and a host of other regional farms take pains to include heirloom varieties of vegetables for dual purposes—culinary and preservationist. Livestock farms such as Stone and Thistle and Heather Ridge Farm make conscious decisions to raise heritage breeds of cattle (Scottish Highland) or pigs (Tamworth). Other farmers choose to focus on cultivated native greens. Gorzynski Farm in Cohecton Center grows many unique varieties of greens like sorrel and dandelion. Mountain Sweet Berry Farm in Roscoe sells fiddleheads and ramps as well as great strawberries and arugulas. The berries at Berried Treasures Farm in Cooks Falls are so delectable to entice Babbo’s pastry chef to regularly source summer dessert berries there. There is a sort of “harking back” to a time when trips to the grocery store—as the stores themselves—were rare and far between. This September brings a new edition of *A Catskill Kitchen: Seasonal Recipes from the Dry Brook Valley* by Evelyn Fairbairn Budd (Purple Mountain Press). This short book is an account of how seasonal food and activities—maple sugaring, trout fishing in creeks, gathering wild leeks and horseradish on trails and hillsides—shaped memories of growing up in the Catskill Mountains. This July witnessed a first in Delaware County: the advent of farmers becoming chefs by opening Fable Dining—a Farm to Table Dining Experience. The Warrens only serve meats from pastured animals raised on their Stone and Thistle Farm and dairy products, vegetables and fruits from neighboring farms. Truly local dining. (When I dined there, the poussins were harvested the day prior and the vegetables that very afternoon.) Denise Warren of Stone and Thistle Farm says, “Local cuisine tends to be a wild food cuisine. Ramps, fiddleheads, Japanese knotweed, burdock, dandelions, lamb’s quarters, plantain, milkweed, berries, mushrooms, honey, mint etc.... While restaurants may not be experiencing with wild foods as much—people are cooking with them. Many of my friends are foraging (what great exercise—hiking or walking and gathering food) and serving great dishes of greens with wild greens and mushrooms. Milkweed or Knotweed pies.”

Terroir—that taste of a place definable in soils, water, climate, vegetation—is a key element of Catskill Cuisine. Mike Biltonen of Stone Ridge Orchard in Stone Ridge says: “Forageables are a huge part of this region and could define a

Catskills cuisine as an identifiable one. The Catskill Mountains provide us with an entirely different climate and there are a lot of vegetables that we can grow better here. Barber's Farm in Schoharie County grows terrific sweet corn. The mountain climate and terrain provide a diversity of wild edibles that we haven't even discovered yet. Wild Amaranth, lambs' quarters, mustard greens, wood sorrel, purslane, ramps, mushrooms." Cornell University's Agroforestry Resource Center in Acra actively encourages forest owners to consider forest farming as a viable source of income. Forest crops might include ginseng, garlic mustard, garlic ramps, mushrooms or fiddleheads.

Artisan food producers like Rick Field of Rick's Picks NYC, a pickling company based on the Lower East Side—sacred pickling territory—that sources from Hudson Valley and Catskill farmers, are successfully tapping into a collective yearning for the past, for those reminiscend kinder, gentler times and lost food traditions: "People miss their ancestral pickling experiences," says Rick. While Rick's methods of making pickles might be old-fashioned, his products aren't the sort of pickled vegetables that granny in gingham concocted. Only three out of his eleven products are pickled cucumbers. The others are pickled green tomatoes (GT 1000s), pickled beets (Phat Beets), pickled okra (Smokra), pickled green beans (Mean Beans, Windy City Wasabeans) and Whup'Asp, his newest masterpiece of pickled asparagus.

Catskill Cuisine: Exotic & Inclusionary

Food artisans like Rick Field are the missing link, bridging old and new. Tradition—in Rick's case, the art and custom of pickling—merges with nouvelle ingredients. For example, coconut flakes and dried cherries replace sugar, green tomatoes are bathed in turmeric, curry, ginger and cinnamon. But how nouvelle is an ingredient once the consumer can purchase it at a rural Great American or Grand Union? Not very. The Age of Exploration and more recently, this last century's communication and travel advancements have broadened American palates to an extent never before seen in gastronomic history. Curry, poblano, couscous, miri wine vinegar, habaño, jalapeño, ginger, tamarind, tomatillo, sushi, (other exotic foods) have been so indoctrinated into our American cookery that even folks out in the Heartland would most likely be able to carry on a discussion on the finer points of the jalapeño. Is the jalapeño still considered exotic and foreign when one can purchase cream cheese jalapeno poppers in virtually any frozen food section?

There is a burgeoning trend in Catskill Region restaurants: serving native or traditionally regional meat (lamb, pork, venison) or vegetables prepared in personal cultural ways or with spice notes that reflect the cumulative globalization of the American palette. Meals are a happy jumble of regional and exotic that work harmoniously. Peckamoose Restaurant in Big Indian sprinkles their menu with peaches in season. Peaches dance across the menu, from appetizer of White Peach Gazpacho with

Hothouse Cucumber, Golden Tomatoes and Almonds or a salad of Organic Arugula and Chevre with NY Peaches, Red Onions and Toasted Pistachios to a dessert of Caramelized Peach Tart with Cardamom Ice Cream. Seravan in Amenia serves Organic Yoghurt Soup with Barley, Black Currants, Fresh Herbs and Curry Oil. Ship to Shore in Kingston offers Stone Church Farm pulled Duck Salad with Avocado, Tomatoes, Pineapple Black Bean Salsa and Sesame Orange Vinaigrette. Somehow, it makes sense and in these times, might perhaps be the most Catskill of an emerging Catskill cuisine because these chefs are cooking a dual sort of reality: ingredients of the place infused with ancestral culinary traditions that combine to create food that strikes a resonant, ancient chord while remaining absolutely fresh and "of the place." We are—all of us—children of the universe and connected, after all.

Catskill Cuisine: Putting the Farm Back in Farmland

The tragedy of the systematic eradication—through unnaturally low fixed milk prices and subsidies—of the region's once thriving dairy farms, while not staunched, is perhaps ameliorated a bit by the recent emergence of other types of farms. Men and women, sometimes former city folk who have come to the land, are breathing a new life into abandoned farm buildings, tilling new crops into the soil, dotting meadows with heritage breeds. The

"Agrarian people of the present, knowing that the land must be well-cared for if anything is to last, understand the need for a settled connection, not just between farmers and their farms, but between urban people and their landscapes."

—Wendell Berry

new farmers have a mutual interdependence with New York City restaurants and markets. Chefs clamor for certain produce—perhaps foraged—or specialty meats, and the farmers listen. Stone Church Farm specializes in French breeds of canard—duck. RSK Farms in Prattsville specializes in fingerling potatoes: German butterball, mini-German butterball, Russian Bananas, Ozette, Purple Peruvians and Ruby Crescent. Thing is, as our urban areas become ever more crowded, noisy and polluted, the demand for land with views to supply second homes (a great many of them carbuncles upon the landscape) increases. Land prices are driven upwards and most farmers—heck, most regular folk—can't afford to buy land to live on, much less the substantial acreage farming requires.

In recent years, local organizations like the Watershed Agricultural Council have been influential in affecting positive

change for farmers. An example is the Pure Catskill campaign. "Pure Catskills is a branding and buy local campaign, is sponsored by the Watershed Agricultural Council in collaboration with farmers and purveyors of fresh food across Delaware, Greene, Otsego, Schoharie, Sullivan and Ulster in New York State." WAC employs a Farm to Market Manager who assists in making critical connections between farmers and chefs or specialty stores in the region and in New York City.

Farm Catskills, another recently formed grass-roots collaborative organization, a consortium of regional farmers, restaurateurs and other concerned Catskill citizenry from homeowners to local government officials, focuses on keeping the region a "working landscape." The region is not wilderness area like the Adirondacks further north, or the Rocky Mountains out West. Farmers have shaped the land for hundreds of years. In a nutshell, farmers need to remain working the land in order to preserve the community for everyone, not just farmers. Farm Catskills seeks to "sustain the people who live here and at the same time protect the land...to ensure that the land remains in active agriculture—not simply open space for recreational uses—in order to maintain the interdependence between communities and land."

Catskill farmers provide the elements of a Catskill cuisine while simultaneously providing rural mystique: the magic of farm buildings clustered out in ploughed fields, graceful striations of grasses. Without Catskill farmers there'd be no surprise of cresting a hill on a country route and seeing the voluptuous rear end of a tractor chugging along or viewing the perennial sheep, goats or cows that imbue the fields with grace and peace as they go about grazing, living.

Shepherdess Sylvia Jorrin of Sylvia's Farm and dairy farmer Tom Hutson of River Haven Farm, although involved in different aspects of agriculture, are nevertheless eloquent when they speak of farming as an avocation, a calling; one as intense, passionate, esoteric and sometimes unexplainable as the calling of an artist. Tom Hutson says, "Farming is my passion, there is an emotional draw, an artistry, a respect for the land. Farming is like an addiction for me. I don't justify it or explain it. It always was an honorable profession. I'm not going to get rich farming but then when we face our maker, it's not going to make any difference."

Sylvia Jorrin (as published in *Farm Aid: Song for America*, with a forward by Willie Nelson) wrote: "Farmers are dreamers of the first order. The most romantic of dreamers. Feet in the soil, head in the clouds, backs bent in today's tractors. They are most wishful of all those who have inherited the earth as their legacy and work with their bodies as well as their minds. Who else depends so strongly on the unknown and goodwill of the unexpected as a farmer does? The impending birth of calves inspires dreams of the calf being the right calf and growing into being the right cow. The planning, the haying, even the milling all being controlled by forces within the realm of



"A Night in the Barn with Rus," by Rebecca McMichael

knowledge and experience and yet controlled by a force far stronger than one can even begin to imagine. There are years when only the steadfast grim concentration can carry one's step to the barn. And days when all goes so well that life is as close to perfection as is possible on this earth."

View the Catskill scenery, but eat the scenery too.

Catskills Cuisine—All Forks Point to the Farmer

Even though the Catskill Region—as opposed to the great swaths of Midwestern farmland—is relatively small, the diversity of the agricultural products is impressive. The creativity of the region's farmers is affecting a change in how the region—as farmland—is perceived. Mike Biltonen of Stone Ridge Orchard says, "The diversity of small farms, doing similar yet very different things and having a pretty good go of it—you don't get that in other places—in terms of diversity. Fifty years ago a farmer would've grown sweet corn and not thought about other things. Farmers today are looking for next best thing. There is a niche to exploit—to build a regional cuisine identity. You can get good apples anywhere, really. The diversity of crops and creativity of the farmer in the Catskill Region is the real identifier."

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