



On Island Tables

Grazing in Shadow of History, Hard Work Equals Satisfying Work

By CHRIS FISCHER

Asked in an interview about five years ago to name his favorite spot in Chilmark, my grandfather almost instantly responded: "The Keith Farm, Middle Road." He then recalled his process of clearing that land, lamenting that he never had the right tools and remembering how he worked late into the evenings with his tractor clearing stone and trees. He always made sure you knew he barely had enough to make it work, though as he told me the stories I could see in his eyes his conviction that all greatness is achieved with some degree of hardship. Late in his life he and I would take drives to the dump or to the market together in his white station wagon, and every time we passed the Keith Farm he would point to it and say, "I cleared that," making sure I appreciated and understood his hard work.

For me, the Keith Farm pastures are a lasting memory of my grandfather, and I feel a sense of history and pride each time I see a car stopped to photograph the grazing cows in its pastures at the scenic spot. The fields roll down from the paved road to a small central pond where in summer you can see its inhabitants, most often cows or Canada geese, seeking relief from the heat in its algae-filled waters, the great Atlantic Ocean stretching across the wide horizon in the background. What a view those happy cows must have. Although I don't know much about the eyesight of grazing animals, I imagine it must be the same for the sheep that live at the Allen Farm with their picturesque views of the cliffs over Lucy Vincent Beach and Chilmark Pond.

It is romantic to imagine a four-legged animal stopping to smell the salt air, filling its nostrils with clean briny scent and pausing for a moment to enjoy the sunset with its grazing mates — just as we do. I hope they experience a certain comfort after a long day of stress-free nourishment on lush pasturesland cared for by thoughtful stewards of the land like Mitchell Posin of the Allen Farm. If you ever have the time, stop by the farm and Mitch will tell you with great enthusiasm about the lifetime of work, soil science and thoughtfulness that he has invested in his grass. And if you have the money, his land produces arguably the best quality lamb I know of.

In this usually frigid month of January, I am drawn to cooking foods that comfort and warm the soul. Eating responsibly is a difficult equation these days, with so many factors — too many to list — but my definition of comfort food is one that fits the season and also has a story about where it came from and who helped bring it to your table. To me that means knowing the animal or what pastures it came from if you choose to eat meat, or the farmer responsible for your produce if you eat only vegetables. With a pasture-raised ruminant like a cow or ewe, this means tasting and smelling the grass they grazed on once the meat is on your plate.

In the wine world, people use the term "terroir" to articulate the characteristics of a distinct vintage in direct correlation to the environment in which it is grown. The combination of lush pastures, salt-air breezes and our New England seasonal weather patterns make for unique meats raised in Island fields. These fields were created by the melting glaciers that formed our Island thousands of years ago and distributed stone throughout our landscape, from the boulders that were blasted by my grandfather with TNT to the mineral deposits that contribute to the micronutrient content of our soils. The stones also were used to build walls as borders and definitions for the pastures. There are over 40 miles of stone walls in the town of Chilmark alone.

John Maloney, a stonemason and poet who lives in Chilmark and has built walls on the Vineyard for my en-

tire lifetime, timelessly evokes the emotions of a contemporary wall builder and those of an old-time farmer in his poem Things We Can't Admit:

This is no job for a grown man, choosing

Rock with banged-up hands....

Design requirements for

Old World in the New World, where

a run

Of round stone the architects re-

ject.....

Dragging the pung of the old-timers

who

Knew, by ox, by horse....

Breaking chocks in the raw sunset.

I can picture John gazing into the sunset, admiring his day of hard work, just as I can picture the proud ewe facing west into the setting sun, gently chewing. Always chewing.

My grandfather wasn't much of a cook, though he produced a lot of food and milk for his community over the years before his death this past summer.



MMM, BRISKET ON THE HOOF, FARM INSTITUTE COWS STRUT THEIR GRASS-FED STUFF.

But his appreciation for food was obvious, and during these shortened days of winter I recall fondly the meals we spent at his picnic table outside with my family at lunchtime during the summer months, with multiple generations gathered at the table. The value of a family sharing a meal together cannot be measured and has no recipe. And no matter the setting or the size of the group, it is important to celebrate the roots and traditions of a meal. By choosing responsibly-raised foods that reflect our Island heritage, whether that food is lobster or collard greens, we are teaching our community the value of having a sense of place.

I often reflect on the choice to continue my grandfather's traditions in farming, and question my skill as a steward of the land. I compare myself with my peers who work much more precisely than I, producing spreadsheets

in offices or exact measurements on construction sites. As I turn mountains of compost with my tractor and toss handfuls of winter rye on my fields as a cover crop, I never really stop to measure anything but instead use my senses

to figure out when the job is done.

And as I stand in the fields my grandfather cleared and look out over the same walls he did at the setting sun, I know that I will continue to learn the lessons taught by nature's unrelenting

ability to keep me humble with its uncertainty.

An additional recipe for lamb burgers can be found with this story at mvgazette.com.



LATE OZZIE FISCHER TENDED COWS AT KEITH FARM.

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Beef Brisket With Apple Mostarda

2 lbs grass-fed brisket of beef
4 leeks
1/2 a head of celery
4 carrots
2 bay leaves
Salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 325 degrees.
Cut brisket into two-inch strips, cutting against the grain of the meat. Season meat generously with salt and pepper and place in a Dutch oven — I use an old enameled cast-iron Dutch oven that belonged to my grandparents, but any container with a lid will do. Add one inch of water to the bottom of the pot, replace lid and place in oven for three hours. This will soften the meat, give it some color and help to render out some of the fat.
When the meat has emerged from the oven, set aside to prepare stock. Chop

the leeks, celery and carrots into large chunks about two inches in length to match the size of the meat and add to approximately six cups of water, salt and bay leaves in a large pot. Add the meat and bring to a simmer for 30 minutes. Before serving, taste the water to ensure it is seasoned to your liking; if not, add salt and let stand for 10 minutes longer. Serve by scooping both vegetables and meat out of broth with a slotted spoon. Serve with apple mostarda and rock salt for the meat.

Apple Mostarda

1/2 cup unsweetened applesauce
1/4 cup Dijon mustard
2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
1 teaspoon honey
1/4 cup diced apples
pinch of salt and grind of pepper

Mix all ingredients in a bowl until well incorporated.

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