



THE
BACKYARD HOMESTEAD
Book of

**KITCHEN
KNOW-HOW**

Field-to-Table Cooking Skills

- Process, preserve, and prepare your homegrown abundance
- Make fresh cheese, cure meats, bake with sourdough, ferment veggies, and much more
- Cook delicious meals from scratch with versatile master recipes

by Andrea Chesman

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THE
BACKYARD HOMESTEAD

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KITCHEN
KNOW-HOW

Field-to-Table Cooking Skills



Andrea Chesman



Storey Publishing

DEDICATION

To

Alison, who supported and walked me through it

Cindy and Michael, who supported and laughed me through it

My family, who supported and helped me through it

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Preface

I live on an acre of land in Ripton, Vermont, a small mountain village. I have a garden that I have at times supplemented with a community-supported agriculture (CSA) share. I make a few gallons of maple syrup every year from just five maple trees. I have harvested and preserved lots of different fruits and plenty of wild foods. And although I do not have experience with animal husbandry, I have managed to barter and buy raw milk, pastured meats, free-range eggs, and honey for most of my adult life. I have helped in a friend's annual turkey harvest, and I have received gifts of live chickens and roosters. I have cooked woodchuck, venison, frog's legs, rabbit, guinea fowl, ducks, and geese, wild and farmed. I have made omelets from duck and goose eggs. I have made pickles and jams, fresh cheeses, and butter. Some of this I have done entirely on my own. In many of my endeavors, I have been helped by my sons, Sam and Rory; my husband, Richard; and too many friends to list here.

I am grateful to live in a rural community, a community of gardeners, farmers, and homesteaders, and so I have accumulated the kitchen skills that go along with raising my own foods and living close to the land.

I came to Vermont in 1980, at the tail end of a back-to-the-land movement, along with many others in search of a more "authentic" lifestyle. Before that I had lived in a rural commune in upstate New York that disintegrated, along with many, many others. Living communally, it turns out, was pretty hard, even harder than subsisting on the land, which was pretty darn hard as it was. (Who does the dishes? Who takes care of the kids? Who takes an outside job and whose money is it anyway?) I'm gratified to see that the back-to-the-land sensibility extends today to cities and suburban households and that food raised without chemicals is a mainstream preference.

Some of my friends make their living from working the land; many more supplement their income with day jobs. My day job has been writing cookbooks and editing other writers' cookbooks. I've been lucky to be a freelancer, lucky to be able to spend days in the kitchen when harvest or inclination drove me, and lucky to have friends who help fill in the gaps when I am in over my head.

I've raised two sons on this small homestead — one turned out to be a city boy, one a country boy. The country boy has many like-minded friends; some are lucky enough to be able to purchase land (sometimes communally, sometimes through land trusts) or access land through family. It is heartening to see all the experimenting and innovation that is the result: we are learning from each other.

My deepest thanks go to all those who helped get this book written. They include Jennifer and Spencer Blackwell of Elmer Farm; Jim Blais of Green Pasture Meats; Sam

Chesman, Richard Ruane, Rory Ruane, Kate Corrigan, and Sebastian Miska of North Branch Farm & Gardens; Mac and Laurie Cox; Jane Eddy; Tonya and Adam Engst; Chris and Elaine Engst; Bay Hammond of Doolittle Farm; Kathy Harrison; Alison Joseph; Sandy Lance; Andrea Morgante; Sara Pitzer; Barbara Pleasant; Nancy Ringer; Hanna Sessions and Greg Bernhardt of Blue Ledge Farm; Rick Shappy; Judy and Will Stever of Golden Russet Farm; Marjorie Sussman and Marian Pollack of Orb Weaver Farm; and Margaret Sutherland and all the other folks at Storey Publishing.

Introduction

A self-sufficient homestead kitchen is a little different from a kitchen that is supplied from a nearby supermarket. It is a kitchen where the cooking is done from scratch using ingredients that are mostly raised or harvested nearby.

Our fruits and vegetables, though freshly harvested, may not be as pristine as supermarket produce, because we don't worry about bug bites or bruises that can be cut away, and we prize flavor and freshness over looks and long shelf life. In fact, we feel triumphant about harvesting even the damaged fruits and veggies, because we know we somehow prevailed against pernicious pests. Needless to say, our fruits and veggies are in season, and no, we don't even think to garnish a Valentine's Day chocolate dessert with fresh raspberries shipped from afar. We have a choice of meats that goes well beyond the relatively few easy-to-prepare cuts the supermarket stocks, and yes, a pig yields more than ham, tenderloin, chops, and bacon.

There's always something going on in the homestead kitchen. Kimchi may be fermenting in the cool spot under the sink. Bread may be rising on top of the refrigerator where the heat collects. In the refrigerator, salt pork may be curing, and in the slow cooker, lard or chicken fat may be rendering. Attached to one of the cupboard door handles, cheesecloth may be draining whey from cheese curds into a bowl on the counter. Yogurt may be culturing under a blanket by the woodstove or in a picnic cooler.

When you are homesteading, working in the kitchen is a never-ending journey of exploration, growth, and learning as one new skill leads to another. Just as gardening leads inevitably into preserving, maple sugaring leads to making granola — simply because you have more syrup than you need for pancakes. Raising chickens for eggs leads to making mayonnaise from scratch, and rendering lard leads to more pie baking, which leads to preserving fruit specifically for pies. And so it goes.

If my experience has taught me one thing, it is that every aspect of growing, harvesting, cooking, and preserving food is about making the best of what comes to hand. This is not the same as making do, which implies a compromise. Our home-canned tomatoes will not look as uniform as store-bought canned tomatoes, but they probably taste better. Our root cellars may not provide perfect storage conditions, but we learn that limp rutabagas make a perfectly elegant purée. A magazine or food blog may declare that certain varieties are the very best apples for pies, but the trees that came with the house yield unnamed apples, and we still make darn fine pies. We may choose to sweeten those apples with our own maple syrup even though the recipe says to use sugar. We learn to apply our best judgment to make delicious food from the raw

materials we raised, bartered, or bought.

For those of us who raise much of our own food, recipes for the foods we put on the table at mealtimes should function more as guidelines than as scientific formulas. (Strict adherence to recipes for making cheeses and some preserved foods are the exceptions.) The recipes in this book provide lots of suggestions for substitutions. The vegetables in a soup or stew or salad can always be changed according to what is on hand. One fruit can be swapped in for another. Even herbs and seasonings can be altered to taste.

I've started the book with a chapter on setting up the homestead kitchen. We should all be lucky enough to work in a beautiful kitchen with an eat-in dining area, plenty of storage capacity, and lots of counter space. My own kitchen lacks everything but a wonderful view of the outside. Processed jars of vegetables and pickles spill over to the dining room because I don't have enough cupboard space, and during canning season the canners go there, too, instead of in the cupboard that is made inaccessible by recycling bins. Despite this, my kitchen functions, and yours will also when you have the equipment you need.

The book is divided into three parts: techniques for fresh foods, techniques for food preservation, and recipes. As I pulled this book together, developing new recipes and documenting old favorites, I found it hard to decide where to put certain recipes. Do the biscuits made with lard and sourdough belong with the pork chapter or the grains chapter? Does peach frozen yogurt belong in the dairy chapter or the fruit chapter? Does a granola sweetened with maple syrup belong with grains or sweeteners? It soon became obvious: our kitchens function as integrated systems where the foods we raise are put to good use in combinations that vary with the seasons. You seldom can separate one piece from another. So the third part of this book is a collection of selected but (mostly) traditional recipes. There are egg dishes that can be enjoyed any time of the day, vegetable dishes that can be either side dishes or main dishes, and meat dishes specifically designed to be used interchangeably with the various types of meats and cuts you might have in your freezer.

Every single chapter included here could have been turned into a whole book. What I hope to share in this book — whether you are fully living off your land or using your gardening and husbandry skills to enrich your life — are the useful skills that will bring your harvests to the table with as much flavor and as little waste as possible. Thank you for letting me into your kitchen.



Getting the Most from Fresh Food

Our food does not always come into the kitchen in pristine condition. What we bring into the kitchen is often dirty or otherwise not recipe ready. Vegetables have been literally just pulled from the ground and may have dirt clinging to them. Just-plucked and gutted chickens need serious rinsing. Milk is warm, and eggs have chicken pox on them.

“What do you want to do?” my son’s playdate asks.

“Let’s go up to the garden and see if there are any beans to eat,” my son suggests.

“Then what?” the boy asks skeptically.

“Then we’ll see if there are carrots, too.”

And off they go to munch on dragon tongue beans, the yellow and purple variety that is delicious eaten raw, to pull baby carrots and eat those, too, with only a few swipes first on their almost-clean jeans. And to inspect some bugs, to pull apart some flowers, to climb the apple tree, to do whatever it is that boys do.

One of the pleasures of raising your own food is being in the moment. Hungry? Eat a raw bean. Thirsty? Eat a cucumber. Curious? See how many different insects you can count. In need of a mood lift? Some folks keep chickens for the sheer pleasure of watching them hunt and peck. Gardening and animal husbandry are both work and play.

Field-to-table cooking is also both work and play. Yes, there is work in getting meals on the table day after day after day. But there is also a truly enjoyable game in seeing how much you can produce and use and how little you can waste. Ideally, the kitchen is part of a circular system, not just the end of a linear progression from field to table. The most self-sufficient homesteads are ones that utilize the kitchen as a part of a mostly closed system of food production. With pigs and chickens and a compost pile, little is ever wasted, but the game is to see how well you can learn to make delicious food out of everything that comes into the kitchen. Homesteading today is not so much about subsistence as it is about quality.

Of course, everyone wants to cut down on waste. This part of the book focuses on what you need to do as the food comes into the kitchen. It focuses on fresh preparation and saves the preservation information for Part II.

Setting Up the Homestead Kitchen

The kitchen isn't just the heart of the home; it is also the headquarters of the homestead. This is where the fruits of all your labor outside are stored, converted, used, and preserved. If you have a good setup and the right equipment, the work of transforming the food you raised into breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snack — not to mention preserving it for the future — will be much easier.

If I were designing a kitchen from scratch, I would start with a big table that could sit at least eight, preferably twelve. When you have a big table, kids can do homework and folks can visit while you cook, and it gives you a place to set down the baskets of freshly picked produce and to set aside projects you're working on. I would also design the space to include a walk-in (unheated) pantry with open shelves for canned goods and equipment only occasionally used. My spices and oils would stay cool in the pantry, and I could keep crates of winter squash and onions there, rather than upstairs in an unheated closet, as I do now. I would use the pantry to keep my ongoing vegetable ferments at a perfect temperature, at least through the winter.

I probably will never have that dream kitchen. Right now, my kitchen is too small for a table, and kids and visitors often perch on my one stool or even on the counter. My canning jars, canners, and dehydrators are stacked in a corner of the dining room during harvest season. The unenclosed porch off the kitchen that leads out to the garden is home to the grill, while the "river porch," outside my office, is where we eat during the summer and where my second refrigerator, used only during the harvest season, lives. I don't even have a dishwasher and don't know where it would go. But we make my kitchen work. We all make it work.

This chapter focuses on setting up a kitchen with the equipment and tools essential to — or extremely useful in — the homestead kitchen. You may already own much of it — the good news is that a lot of the cookware, canners, and appliances perform double duty or even triple duty in the kitchen. Single-use pieces of equipment, such as dehydrators, are covered in the specific chapters discussing the techniques that go with them.

The Big-Ticket Items

Kathy Harrison, friend and author of *Just in Case: How to Be Self-Sufficient When the Unexpected Happens*, among other books, built a screened summer kitchen in a separate outbuilding at her home in western Massachusetts. She has a two-burner

propane stove and a large wash basin and still not enough counter space. (Counter space and storage are always an issue in the homestead kitchen.) She can work in her outdoor kitchen in relative comfort during the dog days of August. In typical fashion, her family constructed the kitchen from recycled parts and relied on their own labor, so the costs weren't excessive.

Even if you don't build yourself a summer kitchen, there are some big-ticket items that you will need starting out. If you buy brand-new and high-end items, you may need to spend some serious money, so shop wisely. Your needs as a backyard homesteader are not the same as those of most urban and suburban dwellers.

A Word about Stoves

If you are designing a kitchen from scratch and are looking for a conventional stove (as opposed to a woodstove), go for gas. The burners heat up faster and are easier to regulate than electric burners. An all-metal stovetop is better than one with an enamel finish. My enameled stovetop has deteriorated due to the high heat of boiling maple sap indoors, but this is just a cosmetic issue and not a functional one.

When I teach preserving workshops, I get a lot of questions about glass or ceramic stovetops. This style of stovetop is the first choice of high-end builders, but it doesn't work for home canners. If you have a glass or ceramic stovetop, you know that you are supposed to use flat-bottomed pots, including a flat-bottomed canner. Such a canner may work only if its diameter does not exceed the diameter of the burner. Check the stove's manual first. It may be possible to use a large canner on the stove, or the stove again it may void the warranty.

Refrigerators and Freezers

You cannot have too much refrigerator and freezer space. A second refrigerator, even if you run it only for a few months a year, is invaluable at the height of the harvest season, even though you can make do with picnic coolers and ice. The second fridge is a necessity for storing milk and really, really helpful for curing and brining meat.

Freezers are necessary for storing large quantities of meat. When it comes to vegetables, most people prefer frozen to canned, so that's another reason for having at least one freezer. The freezer compartment of most refrigerators simply does not provide enough space for meat plus vegetables plus fruit.

Whether you buy a new or used freezer, you will have to choose between a chest freezer and an upright freezer. There are several factors to consider.

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