

Hogtown HomeGrown

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3 springs, 3 chowders and 2 cakes

It all started with a trip Jeff and I took to the mountains of Northeast Georgia for a beautiful week in late April when spring, pollen, blossoms and all, was in the air. For us it was a second chance, since spring sprang right into summer here in Gainesville and Hogtown's early flowers were long gone. We were delighted to see bulbs sprouting, buds opening and the ever-elusive pink dogwoods blooming in shady forest patches off the back roads.

Then Mom and I flew to New Hampshire on the first of May. Patches of snow on the sides of the road stood unmelted and mountain ponds were partially iced over, but the determined daffodils poked their sleepy heads out of the chilly ground. An unseasonably warm day of almost 90 degrees in the White Mountains gave us hope of ascending Mount Washington, while the six feet of snow at the top brought us back to reality. The warm air made the bare trees come to life. Redbuds and dogwoods began their spring show and robins gathered to feed in the emerging grass. I was enchanted to experience a third spring in as many weeks.

Foodie that I am though, I wasn't in New England for just a third spring. While the trip was planned around a heart-warming reunion of my paternal cousins, when that was over and we headed to my cousin's cottage in Rhode Island, the search for three chowders began. Three chowders? Yes. We all know about creamy New England and tomato-based Manhattan, but did you know there's a third type of clam chowder? Clear Chowder, a specialty of Rhode Island, is primarily clam broth with celery, onions, potatoes and clams—no milk, cream or tomatoes. When made well, the clean, sweet yet briny taste showcases the local clams in all their glory. Each restaurant has their own version, but when I found the one I preferred at George's of Galilee, I got a pint to-go. It made a great Mother's Day dinner.

Paired with the chowder was the traditional serving of three clam cakes or fritters—fried balls of dough with a few clam pieces. The fritters studded with clams were good, but this Southern girl likes hush puppies better, because corn meal has more flavor than flour.

Which leads to the other cakes—johnny cakes. Stone-ground white corn meal, usually sourced from the centuries-old Kenyon's Grist Mill, is made into three-inch patties with just boiling water, salt, and a smidge of sugar. Hot off the griddle with a swipe of butter, the crispy outside gives way to a light texture and a fragrant pure corn taste. The johnny cakes at Meldgie's Rivers Edge Cafe in Wakefield, Rhode Island, brought back memories of Granny's fried corn bread, but with a little sweetness. Traditionally served with butter and maple syrup, johnnycakes can also be topped with molasses or the Rhode Island specialty, coffee syrup. I brought a bottle of "Dave's" syrup to try at home, along with a rainbow of corn meal from Paul Drumm, III, the miller and current owner at Kenyon's.

Travel broadens the mind, but the way I travel, it often broadens the hips as well. Food tourism is a wonderful way to explore new locations, learn about local traditions and support local economies. And it always leads to new experiments in the kitchen.

What's Fresh Right Now?

Beans
Beets
Blueberries
Broccoli
Cabbage
Carrots
Cauliflower
Corn
Cucumbers
Eggplant
Fennel
Greens
Herbs
Leeks
Lettuce
Moringa
Mushrooms
Onions
Peaches
Peas
Peppers
Potatoes
Radishes
Shoots and Sprouts
Squash
Strawberries
Tomatoes
Turnips

Due to the lack of sun and almost constant rain, it is hard to predict which crops will thrive or perish. In the normal cycle of North Central Florida crops, we should be in the thick of blackberry, corn and melon seasons, but if these crops survived the harsh spring, they are just coming into the farmers market.

Local and Fresh— Zucchini

Long and gold or round and green, zucchini presents itself in different shapes and colors. The interior is always reliable, tasty on its own or the perfect blank canvas for whatever flavors you can dream up. The only way to ruin it is to overcook it so keep a testing fork handy and take it off the heat “just before” it is done.

Zucchini-Three Ways

INGREDIENTS

3-4 zucchini or 2-3 cups sliced as desired

1-2 Tablespoons olive oil

Leek

2 leeks, chopped

1 garlic clove, smashed and chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

Tomato

1/3 cup sun-dried tomatoes, chopped

1/4 cup white wine or water

1/2 teaspoon dried thyme or basil

Walnut and Feta

1/2 cup walnuts, chopped

1/4 cup feta, crumbled

Pinch of red pepper flakes

DIRECTIONS

Heat a large covered skillet over medium heat. Add zucchini and sauté dry, stirring often, for 3 minutes. Add oil and stir to coat well.

Leek—Add leek and garlic and stir well. Sauté until leeks and zucchini soften. Season to taste.

Tomato—Stir in sun-dried tomatoes, wine and dried herb. Cover and cook five minutes.

Walnut and Feta—Stir in walnuts and cook until zucchini are just softened. Top with feta and pepper flakes.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.



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on your June calendars****

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Clear Chowder with Leeks

INGREDIENTS

3 Tablespoons unsalted butter
2-4 leeks, white part only, quartered lengthwise, cut into 1/4 inch pieces (2-3 cups chopped)
1 pound waxy potatoes, peeled if desired, cut into 1/2 inch pieces
4 cups fresh clam juice OR a great-tasting fish stock mixed with a bottle of clam juice, heated
Salt to taste
2 cups shucked clams or clam pieces, picked through for shell and chopped as desired

DIRECTIONS

In a large covered pot, melt the butter over medium heat and stir the leeks into the butter to coat thoroughly. Reduce heat to low, cover and “sweat” the leeks until soft and sweet, but not browned at all. Stir occasionally.

Stir potatoes into leeks and coat completely. Raise heat to medium high and cook potatoes for 5 minutes, stirring constantly.

Add the heated clam juice, stir and taste for salt. Bring to a boil, cover and reduce heat to medium-low. Cook until potatoes are just tender.

Stir in clams, cover and simmer until clams are hot, 5-15 minutes, depending on the size of the clams.

Serve hot. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Zucchini Skillet with Seafood

INGREDIENTS

2 Tablespoons olive oil, divided
2 zucchini, halved lengthwise and sliced
1 shallot, thinly sliced lengthwise
2 cloves garlic, smashed and chopped
1/2 cup sun-dried tomatoes, chopped
salt, black pepper and/or red pepper flakes to taste
4 each large peeled shrimp and large sea scallops
1/4 cup white wine or broth
6-8 basil leaves

DIRECTIONS

In a covered skillet, over medium heat, combine the first five ingredients. Stir well and cook 5 minutes, stirring often. Season to taste. Lay shrimp and scallops on top and pour wine over all. Cover and cook five minutes, flip seafood, cover and cook an additional five minutes or until shrimp are opaque. Stir in torn basil and serve hot. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Tricks and Tips

“Sweating” is an easy way to retain flavor and moisture while cooking a vegetable until it is tender.

Often done with aromatics, the process of cooking vegetables covered over low heat sweetens and softens the veggies. This is especially good for the members of the onion family, when a milder taste is desired.

Use olive oil or butter, low heat and a cover that lets the moisture drip back into the pot, for best results.

Try sweating several veggies together to create the base of a dish. Louisiana’s Holy Trinity of onions, peppers and celery or France’s mirepoix of onion, celery and carrot are both very traditional combinations.

My favorite combo?
Leek, fennel and carrot.



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Hogtown HomeGrown

Local and Seasonal Recipes, Menus and More

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Tricks and Tips

Coffee syrup is a Rhode Island specialty that can be served drizzled over or under johnny cakes. Produced by several different retailers, the syrup is made from sugar and cold brewed coffee which is cooked down until slightly thickened.

The subtle taste and light sweetness blends well with the johnny cake's rich corn taste.

Coffee syrup is mixed into cold or hot milk to make "coffee milk" and is a delightful alternative to chocolate syrup. It would create a delicious flavor for an old-fashioned egg cream or ice cream soda.

Johnny Cakes with Butter

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup fine stone-ground white corn meal
- 1/2 teaspoon sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 1/2 cups boiling water (bring water to a full boil in a pot or teakettle, not the microwave)
- 1-2 Tablespoons oil for pan
- 2-4 ounces salted butter, softened

DIRECTIONS

In a mixing bowl combine corn meal, sugar and salt and stir well.

Pour 1 cup water into corn meal and stir to a smooth paste. Add additional water as needed to form a smooth, heavy batter.

Heat heavy cast-iron pan or griddle over medium-high heat. Lightly oil the surface. Heat until pan begins to smoke.

Drop spoonfuls of batter onto hot griddle. Quickly and gently use the back of the batter spoon to smooth johnny cake to desired thickness. Do not disturb at all for 6-8 minutes.

The edge should be brown when the johnny cake is ready to flip. Just before flipping, drizzle or spritz oil on top if a crispy crust is desired. Cook additional 4-6 minutes after flipping. The goal is a crispy outside and creamy texture in the center.

Serve hot with lots of high-quality softened salted butter.

SERVING SUGGESTION

For those with a sweet tooth, try johnny cakes with maple syrup, molasses, sorghum, honey or cane syrup. Plate the cakes atop a drizzle of syrup and topped with a dollop of butter.