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A little bit of heaven at the farm market

By: Faith Bahadurian , Special Writer

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Summer's swan song has started, and our farms and gardens are going gangbusters trying to outrun fall. Large squash are surreptitiously left at your door or in the staff kitchen at the office. Eggplants at the farmers' market are multiplying like sci-fi pod people, and there seems to be no end to the tomatoes, although we'd never admit we've had enough of those.

I recently spent a Saturday morning at the West Windsor Community Farmers' Market, soaking up the sights (lots of happy folks), sounds (music by Classic Memories), and smells (Nomad Pizza and Grover's Mill Coffee) filling the air. Alan's Farm flowers were looking glorious, as were the organic tomatoes at ER & Son's stand. I'm always tempted by the products at Griggstown Farm, and the scallops at Jim LaPrete's Shore Catch table looked mighty good this day, too. There is something for everybody at this market, and on such a nice day it was a little slice of heaven on earth.

I have a mental list of things I want to be sure to make while such wonderful local produce is still available. First is cherry tomato bruschetta, inspired by the one Andrea DeMeglio makes at Luca's restaurant in Somerset. In the winter, he knows better than to make the dish with pale, hard tomatoes. So he wisely uses cherry tomatoes instead.

The recipe for Armenian Ratatouille was a hit at the Middle Eastern cooking class I taught for Princeton Adult School last spring. Even though I'd made it a day ahead and re-warmed it in a microwave, it was still delicious. The recipe is very "forgiving." I especially like eggplant so I always use a little more than called for.

The scallop recipe was given to me by Antonio Orantes, who was manning the Catalpa Farm table at the market, which had many varieties of peppers. It is credited to New Jersey food writer Barbara Seelig-Brown and appears in the Jersey Fresh cookbook.

And the double chocolate zucchini bread, which I first enjoyed at a friend's dinner? Obviously, this is a sneaky way to get our kids (or you) to eat their vegetables! But it is just delicious and the zucchini keeps the bread quite moist. And I was never fond of regular zucchini bread anyway.



Photo by Faith Bahadurian

The profusion of fresh local produce at this time of year, illustrated by this scene from the West Windsor Farmers' Market, suggests dishes that make the most of this bounty, such as Armenian Ratatouille.

CHERRY TOMATO BRUSCHETTA

adapted from Andrea DeMeglio

- 1½ cups cherry or grape tomatoes**, halved (a mix of red and yellow is nice)
- 2 cloves garlic**, finely slivered or very thinly sliced
- 4 large basil leaves**, chiffonade (finely sliced)
- ¼ cup best quality fruity extra-virgin olive oil** (this is really important)
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar**
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper** to taste
- 4 large, thick slices country bread**, lightly toasted

Mix all ingredients (except bread) and let sit for a half hour or more, so flavors meld. Pile tomatoes atop each slice of bread, being sure to spoon all the juices onto bread. Serve with plenty of napkins or knives and forks.

ARMENIAN RATATOUILLE

"The Armenian Table," Victoria Jenanyan Wise,
St. Martin's Press, 2004
Serves 6-8.

1 small (¾ pound) eggplant, cut into 2-inch cubes
2 teaspoons kosher salt
½ large green bell pepper, cut into 1-inch squares
2 medium tomatoes, each cut into 6 wedges
2 medium zucchini, trimmed and cut into 1-inch rounds
1 medium yellow or white onion, quartered and sliced 1-inch thick
2 large cloves garlic, coarsely chopped
¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
1½ teaspoons chopped fresh marjoram or ¾ tsp dried
2 teaspoons paprika, hot or mild
2 tablespoons chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

Preheat oven to 375. Place cubed eggplant in a bowl and toss with 1½ tsp salt. Set aside 20-30 minutes.

In a large oven-proof casserole, combine eggplant with bell pepper, tomatoes, zucchini, onion, garlic, oil, marjoram, paprika, and remaining ½ tsp salt (or to taste). Gently stir to mix, cover, and bake for 1 hour, until vegetables are meltingly soft. Garnish with parsley, and serve warm or cold. Keeps up to 5 days refrigerated.

PAN-SEARED SCALLOPS WITH BELL PEPPER CONFETTI

adapted from "Jersey Fresh Cooks"
(New Jersey Department of Agriculture, 2001)

12 to 16 large scallops (for 6 appetizer servings or 4 entrée servings)
½ cup uncooked polenta or cornmeal
¼ teaspoon fine sea salt
Freshly ground black pepper
Olive oil
½ green bell pepper, ¼ inch dice
½ red bell pepper, ¼ inch dice
½ yellow bell pepper, ¼ inch dice
½ cup dry white wine

Combine diced peppers. Place polenta in large bowl and season with salt and pepper. Dip scallops, coating all sides. Add a thin film of oil to a hot sauté pan. Add scallops and sear on one side. Add peppers and sauté while finishing scallops. Turn scallops and cook until just done. Remove scallops to serving plates. Add wine to pan and reduce slightly, stirring, to create a light sauce. Pour sauce and peppers over scallops.

DOUBLE CHOCOLATE ZUCCHINI BREAD

adapted from cooks.com

2 small zucchini (about ½ pound total) or 2 cups grated
4 cups flour
½ cup cocoa
1 ½ cups sugar
1 teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon baking powder
¾ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon cinnamon
½ teaspoon nutmeg
1½ cups oil
3 eggs, lightly beaten
1½ cups milk
2 teaspoons vanilla
1 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Butter 2 (8 x 4 inch) loaf pans.

Grate zucchini. In a large bowl, combine flour, cocoa, sugar, baking soda and powder, salt, cinnamon, and nutmeg. In another bowl, combine zucchini with oil, eggs, milk, and vanilla. Stir into dry ingredients until just blended. Stir in chocolate chips.

Pour batter into prepared pans. Bake until a toothpick stuck in the center of the bread comes out clean, about 1 hour 15 minutes. Cool on rack 10 minutes, then remove from pans and cool completely.

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