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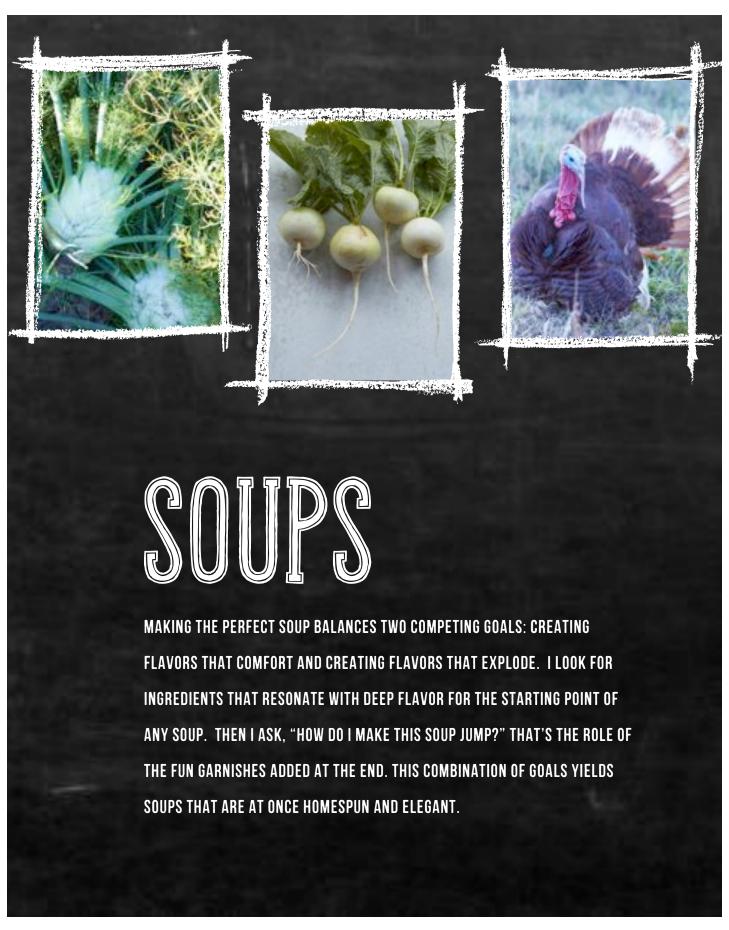




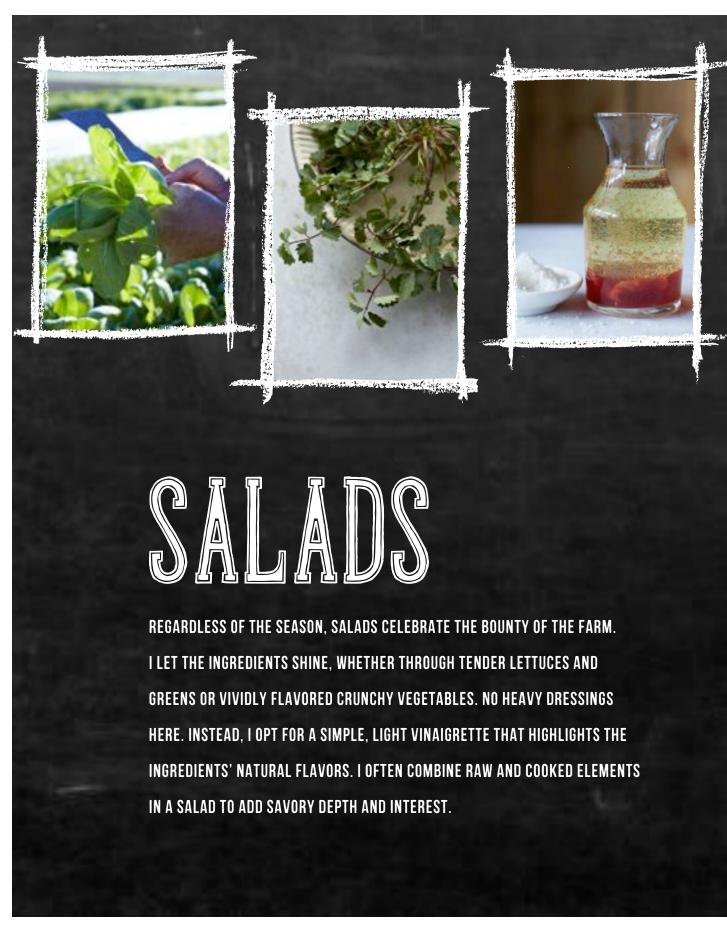


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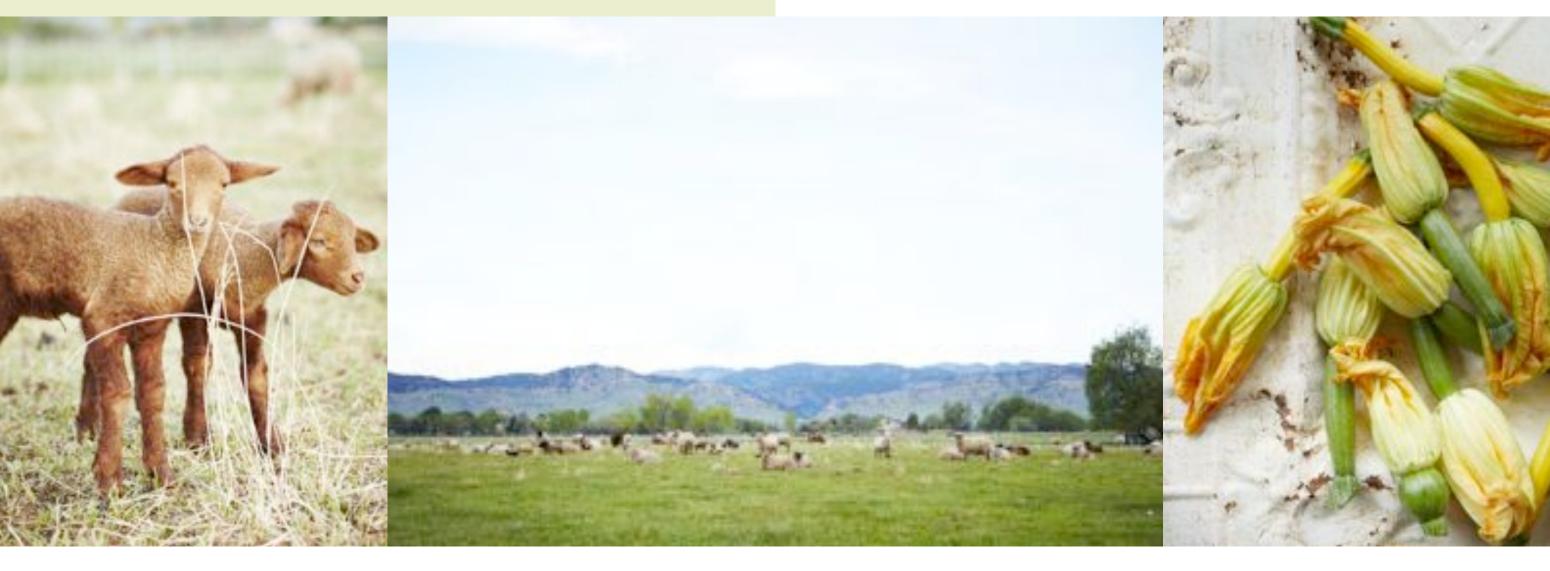








SPRING ON THE FARM



Hope, for me, is defined by walking into the farm's field to harvest on the first warm days of the year. Despite winter's lingering adversity, everything is possible once the season's days begin to warm. Spring combines that glowing warmth with bracing cold—sometimes on the same day. Our harvests and cooking style reflect that, too: long slow-cooked dishes and hearty broths accented with the delicate flowers and tiny leaves I crave after a long winter without.

SQUASH BLOSSOMS

Quick chilling after harvest is essential when harvesting squash blossoms. I like to harvest them early in the morning, well before the afternoon heat is on. Open each flower as you go, for occasionally you'll find a trapped bee inside.





SUMMER ON THE FARM

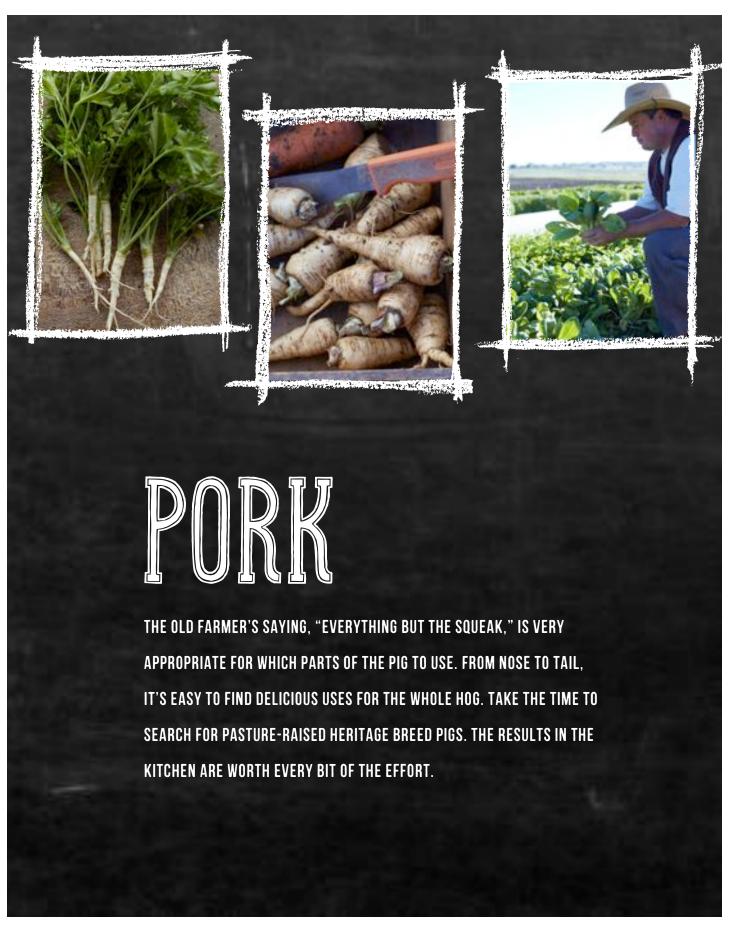


"Make hay while the sun shines," my grandfather used to say. How aptly it describes our farm each summer. The weeks change from glowing warm to intensely hot. While the sweet tomatoes and crisp summer beans destined for the July or August dinner table grow to perfection, the pressure is on to grow vegetables that sustain our restaurants through the cold months as well. Like with the pumpkins or parsnips we'll use in November, much of the fields are devoted to the future. Of course, we make hay, too, as the animals will need something to eat in the winter. After spending a morning in the field heat, my thoughts are on dinners that cool and refresh. Simple meats off the grill paired with crisp, chilled vegetables suit me during the summer.

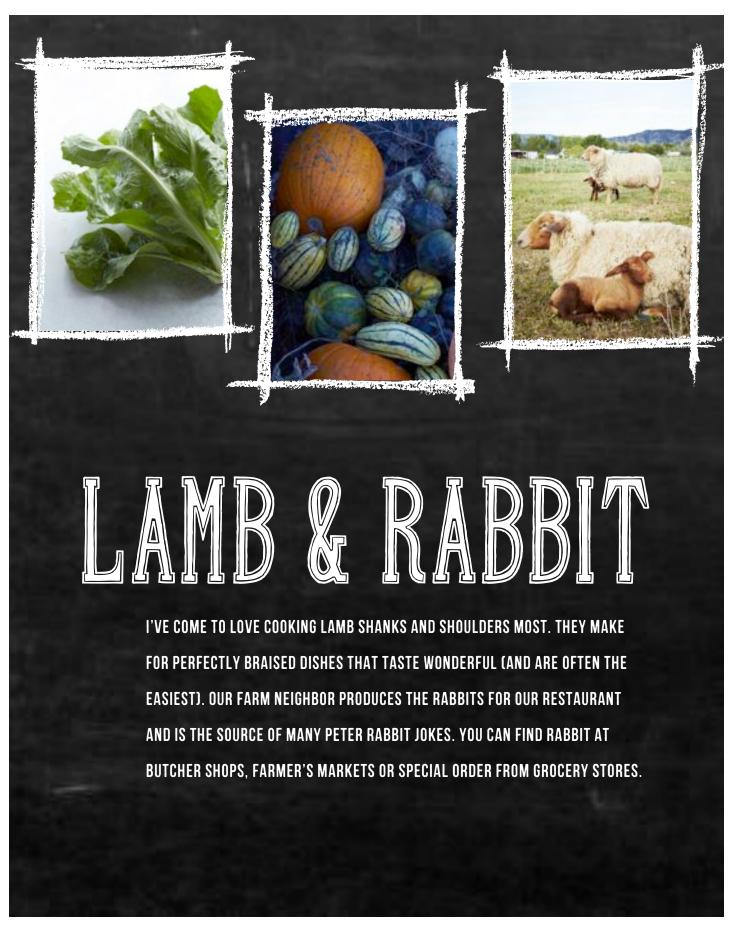
YOUNG (OR GREEN) GARLIC

In the kitchen, garlic has a more interesting story than just the papery cloves we normally see. Traditionally, garlic is planted in the fall and grows slowly through the winter. In the spring, the plant sends up leaves reminiscent of baby leeks. To hold up its flower, the plant produces a firm stalk, or scape. The whole plant can be eaten and tastes pleasantly like garlic. I love to use scapes for purées and soups. I also mince and toss the leaves into salads in lieu of chives. The flowers are perfect on top of crispy potato latkes or with lox on a bagel. My favorite beyond-the-clove use for garlic, though, is for young garlic bulbs—simply a garlic plant harvested before the bulb is fully mature. As the papery cover on the cloves has not fully formed, there is no need to peel, making prep time a snap. Young garlic retains an herbal note that I find endearing. I often make a risotto flavored with the chopped tops that highlights their refreshing, spicy, vegetal note. Or, I'll pickle fingernail-sized heads to use as a foil for rich meats.









AUTUMN ON THE FARM

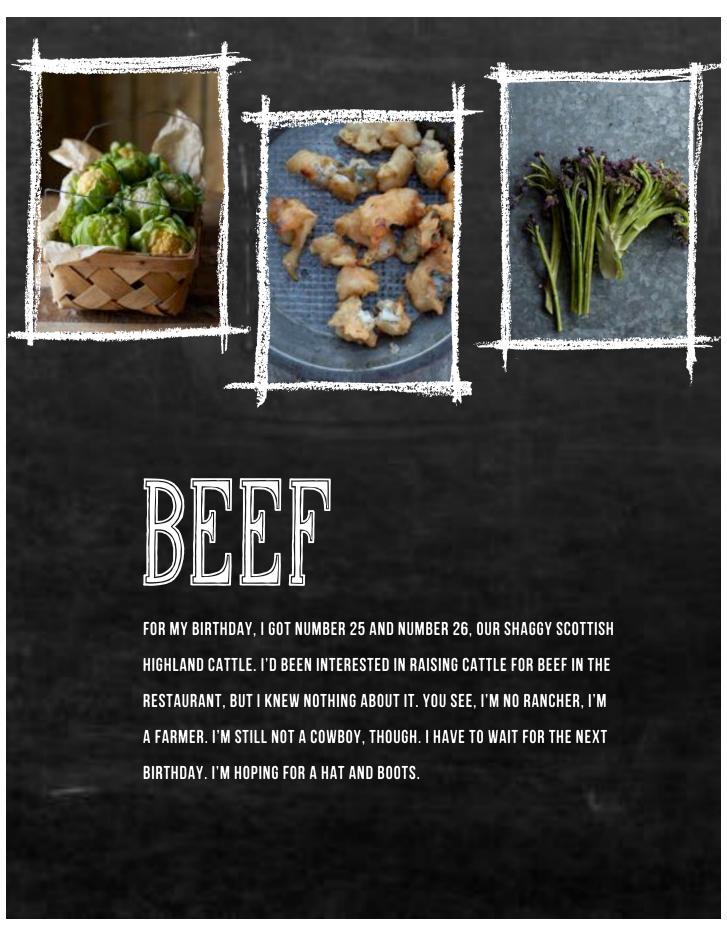


Thinking about fall harvests, I am humbled by the bounty of our farm. The tail end of summer vegetables is still with us as the nights turn chilly. Then along come the fall vegetables: pumpkins, fall roots, cabbages and greens. In autumn, there is always much more than we can use. The hours spent in the fields are replaced with hours behind the stove putting up the harvest for winter. Giant pots of tomato sauce, vats of homemade pickles and sauerkraut, brandied fruits, and apple butter are just some of the regulars added to the fall larder. Deep in the fall, when the last of the warmth has left the air, we begin to fill the giant root cellars under the farm. By the beginning of December, the harvest is in and safely tucked away. The farm has been put to bed.

PUMPKINS

The Black Cat Farm pumpkin patch extends over 5 acres and includes a selection of fourteen varieties. All winter squashes or pumpkins (there is no botanical separation between the two) fall into three types: pepo, maxima and moschata, each with its own unique qualities. The pepos include the small acorns and delicata squashes that are perfect for roasting and then stuffing. The flesh of the maxima group is drier, denser, and packed with flavor. These make the best soups and purées. While the thin-skinned moschatas, like butternut and tromboncino, excel when peeling and dicing is necessary. Growing winter squashes at home is easy, especially if you have the space to let the vines run across the yard. And run they will!





WINTER ON THE FARM



While the pace of the farm slows in winter there is always plenty to do. The farm operates year-round to supply the restaurants; in winter, it's a great challenge. There are animals to keep warm and happy, equipment and water lines to keep from freezing, not to mention our fingers and toes. Even moving from place to place is a workout in deep, snowy fields. Harvesting field greens for the restaurants is the biggest challenge. When buried under a thick layer of snow, we wield long push brooms to gently liberate the rows a few feet at a time. After sweeping off the snow, we peel back the protective covers above the harvest, exposing the sweet, delicious greens underneath. I'm amazed we can pull it off; a glorious harvest found below such a bleak wintry scene. But in the challenge lies the integrity and it's the integrity that lets us sleep soundly, warm in our beds.

CARDOONS

More than most vegetables I sell at the farmer's market, cardoons need a quick recipe to go along with the purchase. I have to admit, most of my recipes come from conversations with the Italian transplants that frequent our stand. Their reaction to seeing the crates of cardoons is nothing short of shouts of pure joy: "Cardoni!" All cardoon recipes share a common braising step. First, the ribs are peeled to remove the spines and tough outer fibers. I keep lemon halves handy to rub the exposed surfaces to prevent browning. Next, the ribs are cut into manageable lengths and braised in water or stock until tender. In Sicily, the braised cardoons are breaded lightly and fried crisp to contrast their buttery artichoke-like interiors, and accompanied by a simple lemony aïoli. Another swoon-worthy dish is a gratin with the braised ribs topped with mint and pine nuts. Unless you are cooking for a big Sicilian family, there will probably be leftover cardoons from the braising step. I store these in a glass container in the fridge, covered with a simple vinaigrette of lemon, olive oil and oregano, for months.

