

Writer  
Celebrating food and people  
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An astrologist once told me, as we chatted over a meal of metaphors, "you have a writer's chart." To my great delight, I've never looked back.

Tracking down local resources for produce, meat and dairy has been a twenty-year preoccupation of mine. The weight of the delicious information prompted me to write a column for my hometown newspaper, The Columbia Daily Herald along with articles for Local Table: A Guide To Food and Farming in Middle Tennessee and Tennessee Connections: An Official Publication of Your Locally Owned Municipal Electric System. Ms Cook is my moniker.

Experiences along the way have provided me with rich materials from which to inspire:

A collection of colorful friends

Knowledge gained by teaching Loco for Local at Columbia State Community College

Lead development in the publication of a nationally awarded winner of the Tabasco Community Cookbook Awards - Provision and Politics

A farm internship at Arugula Star of Neal Family Farms - a Tennessee organic farm

Food explorations to cutting edge culinary sites

Production and hosting of a 5 year Charter cable community show - Educating Maury.

Ms Cook fills a niche and here are some written words from readers to prove just that point:

"Thanks for such a beautiful arrangement of words that touched our souls out here."

"Your column of food, family and friends adds a wonderful dimension to the paper."

"I look forward to your articles in The Herald each Thursday."

"Mrs. Mounger – what a great read today – I'm stopping on the way home and picking up some greens."

"Roben, this brought back memories of my high school days, working in a Jewish Delicatessen in Chattanooga – I still taste some of the food – and the fun – with soldiers stationed nearby at Ft. Oglethorpe."

"You are a marvel and so inspirational for whole foods. Thank you for the hug of your hospitality."

"I save each one, I hope you publish one day."

"Man, you know how to write and make me hungry. The way you put into words, makes you want to pull up to the table and let Granny or Mamma place your food in front of you – Keep up the great job."

"I just wanted you to know that I enjoy your column. I fixed fresh vegetables for New Years with olive oil instead of bacon grease. I also fixed a simple carrot recipe with dill this weekend. We are planning a garden this year after a 15 year break."

I believe, that after reviewing my particular writing style, (one column included and others published on my blog) your publication will choose a respite with Ms Cook for inclusion within the regularly scheduled pace of necessary news. Ms Cook is available to your publication each and every week.

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# The Green Room of My Mind

Memories of mealtimes past bring to mind all that is important in life.

**M**y mother's college roommate called last week. She is 80 years old and, in a wavy voice, she brightly recounted the parties that her mother and my grandmother created for the youth of their community. "Your grandmother's house was the destination and oh, did they cook for us. We had such fun," she says, the emotion in her voice compelling.

The scene of the crime was a 1920 ivy-covered cottage on a canalled street in a Mississippi Delta town. Though it has now fallen into disrepair, it still shines for me in its manicured glory. Dreams appear regularly via that

*(Wait! There's more on page 24 ... )*

# Lettuce Dream

Leafy green veggie is springtime favorite



## About the Author

Roben Mounger, known as Ms. Cook, has a penchant for searching out locally produced ingredients for her family's meals. For some 15 years, she has eaten year round by way of CSAs and farmers markets. In 2009, she began an organic farm internship with Arugula's Star of Neal Family Farms. Roben writes a weekly column about food and people for *The Columbia Daily Herald* and blogs about eating locally at [www.mscookstable.com](http://www.mscookstable.com).

story by **Roben Mounger**

**L**ettuces are a food with transportative powers. The leafy vegetable can provide the most delicate of flavors in the dead of winter and then in spring enhance the brightness of a meal. The freshness of this plant is stunning in its adaptability, and many Tennessee growers have their egos stoked after presenting a locally grown lettuce crop to their public. On the barest winter day, I have found a bowl of mixed greens the needed contrast and in early spring a harbinger of summer realms.

The flavors of lettuces vary from mild to strong, and their appearance can differ in a charmingly curious manner from heads that spread wide open in a wavy design to others that curl into a ball. They can be faint of color to dark green, some are red and others speckled. Since heat makes the plants bolt, a home gardener must be mindful to shade the plants if grown in summer or rather focus on spring, fall or winter plantings. Many Tennessee farmers specialize in lettuce varieties and utilize techniques that spark tasty dining with a minimum of concoction.

"Customers love the fresh lettuce," says John Dysinger of Bountiful Blessings Farm, a winter CSA in Williamsport. "It's a splash of color and brings vibrant life to the table. We like to think that it's not only promoting physical health, but emotional

and even spiritual health as well."

Amazingly, lettuces can handle temperatures down in the 20s if protected by floating row covers over wire hoops to prevent damage. After the holidays and into the spring, many farms like the Dysinger's use hoop houses for their lettuces as the sheltered environment creates a tempered refuge for growth and harvest.

Farmer Brown's in Warren County grows lettuce crops using hydroponics, the process of growing plants in water without soil. The Browns say the advantages over soil include efficient use of water and minerals and nutrition regulation that turns out "some of the finest lettuce in the world, period." They work to produce their dynamic lettuces with a pest management system that makes use of tree frogs, ladybugs and praying mantises.

Windermere Farms and Apiaries have an ingenious irrigation system in which piquancy is enhanced by runoff from the hills into the ponds pumped to tanks on the ridge of their acreage. The plants are then gravity-fed as needed. Ken Lansing, designer of the Memphis farm, has an affinity for a pristine salad and has created unique peppered vinegar that amplifies his dressings.

Which brings me to the creative assembly – Tennessee grown – of the beautiful rustic salad and her dressing. ■

# Porter pigs, sauce and such

When I was young, I became enthralled with the romanticism of a pig roast. This idea lived entirely in my imagination clarified by reading Edna Ferber's Pulitzer Prize winning book, "Giant" and watching the Oscar winning movie by the same title. In Technicolor, Texan Bick Benedict (Rock Hudson) goes to Maryland to buy a prize stallion and brings home the stallion and delicately bred bride Leslie Lynnton (Elizabeth Taylor). The bride's refined sensibilities are challenged by a "welcome to Texas" barbecue complete with an earthen roasting pit. The easterner learns that Texans are worth their salt — they know how to roast a pig.

Eventually sans Texas heritage bit, my prayers were answered, and I came to experience one or two of these very colorful and delectable eating experiences. An artisan of the pig roast lives among us and his name is John Cheairs Porter. Many know John not only as a roast master but also a generous community supporter and advisor. He first attempted his now legendary cooking feat in his twenties with a friend during hog killing season and has layered his methodology with expertise for some 50 years. Somewhere along the way he designed and built an Oklahoma rig-style oven which has traveled as far as St. Louis in service to his friends and family. His devotion to the art is exceptional, as the oven requires overnight pig sitting with additional extracurricular activities such as feeding the fire and adding up to 50 gallons of water to create an oven temperature which can be controlled. Over time, he has collected many dear friends to relieve him in shifts during nighttime



Courtesy photos

The man, John Porter and his machine.

duty as well as aiding in the final task of shredding the meat.

Most recently he got politically correct and roasted a 165-pound Tamworth Heirloom Hog, which he purchased from Roy Blair at Three Meadows Farm in Columbia. Tamworths, originating in England, have long been considered a "bacon" type hog and lost popularity locally when the aim shifted to the "lard" hog. The Blair family focuses on using naturally healthy methods of raising livestock — no growth hormones or antibiotics to improve weight gain. Raised on pasture with excellent foraging skills, these pigs are from their own breeding stock and are processed in USDA inspected facilities. For the performance of his life, this particular fine Tamworth hog required an indirect fire at 220 for over 12 hours and John by his side.

One of the things I like the most about John is his wife Gerrie. She too has contributed to the community in various ways and is an outstanding conversationalist, cook and traveler with a bright cadre of tidbits from the culinary world. John's pigs are delicious but Gerrie's green sauce is a treat of unexplainable value.

"Green sauces for meat are found in most cultures,

and this is one that I have developed over time," said Gerrie.

While this sauce is an enhancement to both meats and vegetables, I'm sure if ladled over my ancient Birkenstocks ... I would inhale with glee.

Only the ingredients are shared with this sauce recipe and in encouragement, I will quote Michael Ruhlman in his book, "The Elements of Cooking."

"Recipes are not assembly manuals. You can't use them the way you use instructions to put together your grill or the rec room Ping-Pong table. Recipes are guides and suggestions for a process that is infinitely nuanced. Recipes are sheet music. A Bach cello suite can be performed at a beginner's level or given extraordinary interpretations by Yo-Yo Ma — same notes/ingredients, vastly different outcomes."

Now thanks to inspiration from John, organic pork from Roy and the secret goods from Gerrie, you too can achieve legendary Giant-like memories for your people ... And to think this kind of brilliance is all home grown.

## GERRIE'S PARSLEY SAUCE

Parsley (as many as 3 bunches)  
Extra Virgin Olive Oil (add enough for a sauce consistency)

Lemon Juice  
Capers  
Garlic  
Chopped Onion  
Herbal Mustard

Place parsley, mustard, garlic, capers, onions, lemon juice, salt and pepper in the bowl of a food processor. Pulse to chop the parsley. With the machine running, add the olive oil gradually and process until creamy and smooth.

♦♦♦

Ms. Cook is committed to the discovery and enjoyment of locally grown and crafted foods. She tells a tale of real food choices that will benefit the health of the family and the community.

## RESOURCES

Three Meadows Farm  
Treina and Roy Blair  
2487 Fred White Road  
Columbia, TN 38401  
www.threemeadows-farmllc.com  
Pork Menu:  
Sausage (mild, medium, hot)  
Ground Pork  
Roast  
Pork Chops  
Fresh Bacon (not cured)  
Ham Steaks  
Cutlets  
Country Style Ribs  
Tenderloin  
Sliced Boneless Tenderloin  
Loin Roast