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# MIRACULOUS CORN

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BY KIM MOTYLEWSKI

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From mid-July to early-October the ever present piles of “Sweet Corn, Picked Today” at farm stands and neighborhood green markets across the region is a minor miracle of organization. “Corn is King,” in the summer months, says produce wholesaler and distributor Tony Russo of the fast paced, intensely social business of getting corn to market. “It’s crazy-making,” remembers John Lee, head of Brookline’s Allandale Farm. He grew corn for years, but now buys most of the corn he sells from Verrill Farm in Concord. Steve Verrill just smiles and says, “I have fun most every day.”

At Verrill’s place, and at Volante Farms in Needham, and at Lexington’s Wilson Farm, everywhere corn is grown, planning for this summer’s crop began, well, last summer. Field managers observed which varieties fared best. They compared growing times— anywhere from 70 to 90 days to harvest — and yields of the various types. They tasted. They talked to their sales people about what customers liked and didn’t like. By December, Verrill decided on 16 different varieties and ordered seed: some bearing white kernels others

white and yellow; some simple sweet types, others “sugar-enhanced” or “supersweet”; a mix of early harvesters, and those that take their sweet time.

None of this corn will travel far, so Verrill and other farm stand growers opt for tenderness and taste. Growers who ship corn to distant markets must choose tougher types that can withstand transport.

The biggest challenge with corn, John Lee and Steve Verrill agree, is customers’ demand for corn picked today. Having perfectly ripe, just-picked ears for sale every day, from mid July onward takes planning and flexibility. With spreadsheet, calendar and growing times in hand Verrill plots his plantings — one per week from April 10 to July 10.

Oh and don’t forget — field conditions vary. Soggy areas can’t be planted until dry. Corn dislikes wet feet. Cross-breeding is a concern. Mustn’t plant this yellow corn too close to that white or neither will produce ears true to type. And corn isn’t the only crop. Strawberries and tomatoes

Photograph: Carole Topalian

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and beet and beans all have their own requirements. Says Verrill in his understated way, field layout is “a management puzzle.”

Poor weather scatters the pieces. By early April, plows churned in Verrill’s fields but the first corn planting was delayed until the 19th. Rain fell for an entire week in May and scrapped one planting. The growing and harvest schedule for that batch was set back some, but, “we adjust,” says Verrill calmly, meaning he substituted a quicker growing type, or shifted to a drier field.

Good “corn weather” means nice hot temps with a shower once or twice a week. If drought hits, you’ve got a “corn twister” on your hands and that costs money. By one reckoning, sweet corn sales account for about 40 percent of vegetable cash receipts in the state. The 5,600 acres that Massachusetts growers planted in sweet corn puts the crop in the state’s top 5 as measured by acreage.

Pests are another worry. The caterpillars of various moths – European Corn Borer, Corn Earworm, Fall Armyworm – all feed on ears of new corn. Cooks and consumers dislike these critters, but finding one inside an ear isn’t all bad. It means the corn has been sprayed judiciously or not at all.

Hutchins Farm in Concord is one organic corn grower, but most others feel they can’t risk losing a crop to these pests, so they use some chemical controls. As the tassels on new ears open, careful growers monitor their fields for the worms. With so-called Integrated Pest Management (IPM) the farmer applies pesticide only if worms appear in significant number, never as a matter of course.

As the first-planted fields approach maturity, Steve Verrill begins his 10-week, raw corn diet. Every day he browses tall, orderly rows of sweet corn, and nibbles on tender ears. He is a “connoisseur” searching for peak flavor and optimum snap. “You’ve got to taste both ends,” says Verrill. “Sweetness starts at the base of the ear. It takes a day or two to reach to the tip.”

All over the state, telling tastes such as this drive growers to their phones. Steve Verrill calls Allandale Farm. “John, the ‘cahn’ is in.” Al from Volante’s and Scott from Wilson’s and Bill from Pioneer Valley Growers and a dozen other growers call distributor Tony Russo: The corn is in. Come and get it. We’ll have a dozen bags tomorrow morning. The race is on to harvest and sell ripe corn as quickly as possible.

On any given evening, Russo might talk to a dozen farmers in six New England states and dispatch truck drivers in the small hours of the morning. Some far flung growers har-

vest at 3 or 4 a.m. to be ready when the trucks arrive. They pick beneath portable lights, silhouettes in the misty, morning darkness.

Steve Verrill and couple of his Jamaican farm hands arrive at their fully ripe fields at 6 A.M. Verrill drives the tractor and wagon up each row. The men bend, cut cobs and toss them into the wagon. At that hour the workers might be sweating, freezing or soaking wet. Saw-toothed corn leaves scratch and poke. Usually, each stalk produces just one ear. All that growth and greenery for one.

At the edge of the field the pickers bag the corn, five dozen per bundle. John Lee drives up, loads Allandale’s order in his pick-up and heads to town. By 9 A.M. Verrill hauls the rest of his load to a walk-in cooler to keep it moist and cold, ready for his own customers that day.

The trucks arrive at Russo’s in Watertown throughout the morning. Strongmen handle as many as 500 bags a day, each weighing up to 70 pounds. They regroup and reload much of the bounty for delivery to farm stands, retail stores and wholesalers throughout metro Boston. They carry some into their own store. Produce handlers pile the ears high on a display stand and plunk a trash barrel beside it. Some folks shuck on the spot.

And so it goes in corn season. The fieldwork, coordination, trucking, handling, displaying, selling and eating repeat themselves seven-days-a-week, for the rest the summer, and if all goes well, into early October.

Enjoy it while you can. ❖

*Kim Motylewski is a print and radio journalist based in Cambridge. She has written about intersections of food, health and the environment for NPR’s Living on Earth, and The Boston Globe. She can be reached at kmotyl@yahoo.com..*



## GUIDA PONTE'S CORN CHOWDER

*A note from the editor:* The first time I tried this chowder was at Verrill Farm's Tomato and Corn Festival. The lines were long and people kept going back for more. After tasting it, I totally understood and was hooked myself.

Serves 14.

12 ears of corn, kernels removed raw  
8 oz butter  
1 cup white flour  
4 slices of bacon, finely diced  
2 cups white onion, finely diced  
4 garlic cloves, minced  
1 cup celery, finely small  
2 lbs Yukon potatoes, peeled, finely diced, cooked and drained  
1 tsp red pepper flakes  
1 tsp dried thyme  
1 quart light cream  
2 Tbsp olive oil  
3½ quart chicken stock  
Salt and pepper to taste

After the corn is cut from the cob, place cobs in a pot with the stock and boil for 10 minutes. Strain and set warm stock aside. Discard the cobs.

In a large 1½ gallon stock pot, melt half the butter on a high heat and cook the bacon until crispy. Remove the pot from the heat. Place bacon on paper towels and dry, set aside.

Add the onion to the butter and bacon fat in the pot and cook on medium heat for 10 minutes or until they start to color.

Stir in half the corn kernels and cook for a few minutes. Add the garlic and cook for a few minutes, continuously stirring. Add the red pepper flakes and the stock and bring to a boil on high heat.

In a small pot, bring the cream just to a boil and add to the corn mixture. Cook for 5 minutes on medium heat and stir well. Remove from the heat and set aside. Allow this mixture to cool slightly and blend until smooth. Add this mixture to the large pot and keep off the heat.

In a small pot, melt the remaining butter and off the heat blend in the flour until smooth and no lumps. Cook this roux over low heat stirring all the time. Cook for approximately 5 minutes.

Add the roux (flour mixture) to the blended corn mixture and return to medium heat. Stir well and bring to a boil. Stir well so it does not stick to the bottom of the pot.

In a medium size saute pan, saute on high heat the remaining corn, the celery and thyme in olive oil for 5 minutes or until tender. Add this mixture and the potatoes to the large pot. Mix well and season to taste.



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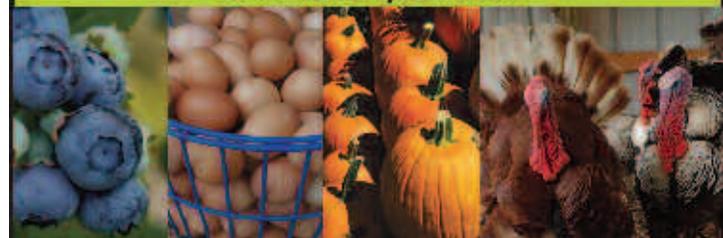
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