

Their aim was bold and far-reaching — produce a play that would let them meld their crafts, touch their community and contribute to a worthy cause. But it was their underlying belief in the importance of the relationship between quality food and a heartfelt effort that would sustain and propell them through their weeklong goal.

food

it plays so many roles in our everyday lives

Food largely determines our overall well-being. It has the ability to stimulate our deepest memories, feed us physically and emotionally and for many, it has spiritual associations. The farming of our food, theoretically, is a seasonal affair that defines summer as a time of growing and producing. Fall, on the other hand, is a time when we prepare to rest and contemplate what we just grew, ate and experienced.

This being said let me tell you a story of what happened to me and some newly found friends after I was given the opportunity to cook for 30 professional theater people in a small lakeside community of New York, and the satiating affects that it had on all of us.

In mid July, an owner friend of the delightful little restaurant, “Relish,” asked if I'd be interested in cooking for his director friends, Brian and Melissa, and their theater cast for a week of rehearsals and the final production. “Of course,” I said, without hesitation. And so the journey began. My husband and I drove out to meet with Melissa to get a lay of the land and talk about the specifics concerning the project at hand. Her stone Dutch Colonial at the waters edge greeted us as warmly as she did. She gave us a tour of their recently renovated old mill home and the property it sat on as their home and grounds were literally the place she and her husband Brian have been hosting and staging productions of a Chekhov play, every summer for the last 3 years. What started out as a time of getting together for fun with some their closest colleagues has turned into a week long event that involves their local community and has expanded into financial support to artists in need.

At the root of this event were Melissa and Brian's wish to honor their friends "hard work at play" by providing **fresh, local, lovingly prepared, organic meals**. They noticed that a major element of this event had become the "food" and how they all came to enjoy and rely on the last meal of the day in many unobvious ways. It had taken on such significance in fact, that they wanted to honor it by having someone cook great food for them. This was their insurance that they wouldn't lose what they felt was their central goal of doing quality, successful justice to the Chekhov work of the week, *The Cherry Orchard*.

And this is what I do — I cook with organic, local, whole foods that are in season! Not to mention that I love the whole theater ambiance. I was hooked! The positive sense I felt coming into this adventure was confirmed. This project was right up my alley. Was I already under the Chekhov spell?

I ran home, re-read *The Cherry Orchard*, wrapped up loose ends for my private cooking clients, saw my dad through emergency surgery and flew off to a vacation in Ireland to then dream about menus and the upcoming community theater troupe cooking adventure that lay ahead of me.

When I returned, fresh and ready to go, I was able to get our local health food stores, farmers and purveyors involved. The Hungry Hollow Co-Op in Chestnut Ridge generously organized vendors to donate cases of fresh produce, gave a donation to Habitat for Humanity/Musicians Village in New Orleans and extended us a discount for our groceries. Back to Earth in New City also extended grocery discounts and plenty of personal assistance getting more cases of groceries into my little Honda than imaginable! Ron Rendes supplied us with the freshest cold water, **wild fish** and "Top Dog," Jay Dines, made it possible for us to have the best **grass fed** meats around. Everyone's help enriched our cause while we supported the principals of sustainable agriculture that render us local, **organic** foods. The relationships alone that were built during the process were huge, not to mention my first and very lasting impression of our Production Manager. She continues to rekindle my respect for vegetarian ideals each and every day and also reminds me of how effective people can be when working together towards a similar goal.

From the first day that I pulled in to start this job, I was met with a total sense of inclusion. I was right away showered with help and had lots of new names to learn and faces to remember.



My kitchen was a modest one, basically backstage to the front and back yards used for acts 1 and 3, 2 and 4 respectively. This location put me in a prime position to get help without even asking. It also had the merchandising/marketing effect of drawing customers in

that David's Cookies had in the Macy's Arcade back in the day! One of the many actors was so supportive and enthusiastic about the daily goings on in the kitchen that he would sniff his way happily though the hub and repeat the words "cook book!" every time he passed my way. He wasn't clowning around and his persistence really rang home to me. Because of his enthusiasm and the unwavering support I decided there

We'd sit down together, toast our hearts out and eat, eat, eat!

will be a cookbook documenting our meals together in the "Cherry Orchard."

For 6 days, I played the role of personal chef to 30 actors in a very visible backstage kitchen. Sometimes I was there from 8 in the morning 'til ten at night and actually found it hard to leave as the site was so energizing! And I had such great help — whoever didn't have a line to rehearse or an orchard to cut down was always there for me! By 5pm, we set tables and served the meal.

Later that week, one of the musicians told me what it meant to him to anticipate the evening meal all day and then sit down and partake in it together. For him, the meal was a treat compared to what he was used to. And he was completely motivated creatively knowing that the evening meal would reward he and his colleagues by sustaining them through the many important tasks during their late night rehearsals. Lastly, after eating with complete abandon, he confessed that up until that week he'd always been a cautious and unadventurous eater due to a fear of food allergies. He was amazed and ultimately humbled by the realization that, in the end, he hadn't had a single allergic reaction to anything, just a big "ah ha" about eating instead! His being a musician inspired me to include a sound track of the performance with the cookbook I'm going to do. After all, years ago Laura Esquivel included a music CD in her book "The Law of Love" or better yet, when she dished up "Water for Chocolate!"

By the time the day of the performance arrived, everyone had been affected by what they'd eaten during the week. Whether it was the cherry pie on the very first night or the hand-made hamburgers, playfully assembled by the neighborhood kids for the potluck community picnic/intermission — everyone was satiated. There was



more than enough energy for their sets to be built, their lighting to shine, the costumes to take shape, the music to resonate within us, the actors to play hard and experience deeply and for the ax that cut the Cherry Tree to be swung to it's delightful conclusion.

Friends, neighbors and food purveyors had come together to feed and house the guest players. Despite the rain, community was promoted and preserved and we raised several thousand dollars for the Habitat for Humanity/Musicians Village in New Orleans. The smells and tastes of good food, the friends and memories, old and new, and the sensations of the Cherry Orchard story itself ... surrounding us everywhere, even in the name! It was a literal picnic!

What impressed me most was how well all the parts were played, how expansive the feelings of possibility and community can really be, how my many new acquaintances awakened me by extending their hands, mouths, stomachs and hearts, all stemming from the notion that food was to be center stage for this production. I now better understand my roll from this experience and how I can play my part more profoundly in the bigger picture called life!

It's very interesting to sit back, take a minute (or maybe even a season) to contemplate what lies dormant within each of us and then explore those potential forces coming from the place of our BEING. From my culinary perspective, there were so many forces at play that week of simply cooking for 30 not so complete strangers anymore. I didn't just feed them; we all fed each other and the various communities within our midst.

Awaken those mental messages my friends! **mm**



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