



O. Henry's Great Harvest Meal Challenge

Five chefs,
five ingredients
... Let's eat!

BY NANCY OAKLEY • PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMY FREEMAN

Call it O. Henry's take on reality TV. Borrowing from the format of the popular program *Chopped*, we asked five local chefs to create something — either a composed dish or multiple dishes — using five, locally sourced ingredients typical of the season: pork sausage (ground or link); sweet potatoes; grits from the Old Mill at Guilford; greens other than collards; local honey or homemade jam. We left the definition of “local” open to interpretation — and in some cases it's wide open — and allowed our cooks to use other items in their pantries to prepare the dishes. We also eliminated the pressure of competition. No judging here; our mission is simply to celebrate creativity in the kitchen.





Diane Compton

KITCHEN AND HOME SPECIALIST,
WILLIAMS-SONOMA

“Sometimes a dish will stick in your memory forever,” Diane Compton says, recalling a five-layered terrine of fried blue, yellow and corn grits that she’d eaten during a trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico, long ago. “I tried for years to replicate the flavor of those grits. Who knew all I needed was the Old Mill?” Her spin: layers of white and yellow grits fried in a Finex cast-iron skillet from Williams-Sonoma, of course, at the Shops at Friendly, where she teaches cooking classes. Using honey from Quaker Acres Apiaries that she discovered at the Greensboro Farmers Curb Market, she topped the grits with orange honey butter. “Citrus lightens and brightens the honey butter. You can add some orange zest for more pronounced orange flavor,” Compton adds.

Moving on to the sweet potato, which she also found at the farmers market, Compton “opted for easy” with sweet potato soup. How easy? “Forget peeling and boiling, let’s roast ‘em!” Compton enthuses. “Roasting concentrates the flavors and they’re super easy to peel and use,” she explains, and suggests “resisting the urge to overwhelm the soup with too much onion and garlic. A little fried bacon works well as a salty counterpoint to the sweet potato.” She chopped up some

chives for color and aroma. “I used house-cured bacon from Gate City Butcher and Gourmet Market.” The chives came from her own herb garden, something Compton encourages every cook to cultivate. “As a transplanted Texan, it is a constant delight to discover how well things grow in N.C.,” she observes. She mixed it all together in a blender, which she says, produces a “wonderful texture” in soups — without added cream or butter.

For her *pièce de résistance*, Compton chose risotto. Again, Gate City Butcher provided her with the pork: Chef Freddy Gentile’s sweet Italian sausage, which she sliced and browned. Using Carnaroli rice instead of Arborio, a combination of wild mushrooms and Baby Bellas, and Madeira (“good in cold weather”), Compton reduced the labor from what is typically a labor-intensive dish by tossing it all into a pressure cooker. “You can still get the creamy texture and bite that risotto devotees love,” she says. Topping it off with a peppery note that offsets the richness of the sausage and mushrooms, Compton added roughly chopped arugula from Flora Ridge Farm in Mt. Airy. “Add them the last few minutes before serving,” she advises, “and let them wilt.”

Why these three dishes? “With the nights getting cooler and darker, you just kind of gravitate toward what I would call more grounded food,” Compton says, admitting to a more self-interested reason: adding new options to her repertoire for entertaining.





Felicia McMillan

EXECUTIVE CHEF AND GENERAL MANAGER,
LUCKY 32 SOUTHERN KITCHEN

Fall, “is more of a challenge, creatively,” says Felicia McMillan, executive chef and general manager of Lucky 32 in Greensboro. “It’s not as exciting as the spring and in terms of the produce, you’re extremely limited — and how many things can you do with butternut squash?” she says with a twinkle in her eye.

After some consideration, McMillan decided the five fall ingredients in O.H.’s Harvest Meal Challenge would work well blended together into a single breakfast dish. “Grits are so versatile, you can make them savory, sweet. Do whatever you want with them,” she explains. Recalling a recipe she’d created for pumpkin oatmeal, McMillan hit upon the idea of making purée from Cedar Hill Farms’ sweet potatoes (available at the Piedmont Triad Farmers Market on Sandy Ridge Road) and then mixing it into the grits. “So you have a seemingly sweet grit,” she notes, the perfect counterpoint for something livelier. “I love sweet and hot,” McMillan says. “Who doesn’t like sweet and spicy at the same time?” Her solution: pepper honey.

Her apiary of choice is the Pleasant Bee in Raleigh. “They actually certify the people in North Carolina who are beekeepers; they’re pretty fantastic,” McMillan offers. To provide the heat, she thought about adding poblano peppers to the honey but opted for a more familiar favorite, Texas Pete siracha, aka CHA!

The single, sweet-hot base of grits needed just the right kind of sausage to complement it. For McMillan, there is only one: Italian sausage from Hickory Nut Ridge near Asheville. “We are huge, huge fans of theirs. We are getting every pork we possibly can from them. We’ve been getting ground beef from them. They are just outstanding small farmers.”

With four out of the five ingredients down, McMillan selected creasy greens, aka Upland cress, found in the wild in central N.C. “Creasies have that chicory watercress note to them, so I thought, ‘bring some of it out with the pepper, but don’t kill it with the honey,’” she says. Just one problem: Creasy greens were difficult to find, so McMillan substituted with locally produced watercress, which proved “a bummer.”

But no matter, McMillan found her rustic creation “yummy,” overall, thanks in large part to the grits and the sausage. It’s a hearty one, too, perfect for cold mornings at the family breakfast table. And that’s what cooking this time of year is all about she says. “When you think about fall food, it may not be as much celebration of produce, but it’s home, it’s family, just takes you to a different place.”

Bill Carone

THIRD-YEAR STUDENT, CULINARY ARTS, GTCC

For Bill Carone, third-year student at Guilford Tech's Culinary Arts program, there's nothing that says "fall" and "Thanksgiving" like football. In assisting a fellow student at a food competition, he had made a quenelle of grit, the inspiration for his contribution to the Great Harvest Meal Challenge. "I thought, 'OK, I can make these bigger than we did for the competition. And I'll make quenelle of grits. And they'll look like little footballs.'"

Placing them alongside starters of purple sweet potato fries on top of a purée of sweet potato, sourced from a vendor at the Piedmont Triad Farmers Market and sweetened with honey from Houser Farms in Vale, North Carolina, Carone actually decorated the "lacing" on the quenelle "football" with a sauce from homemade red raspberry jam (also from Houser Farms). He's a fan of late summer fruit, which he feels is often underused.

Accompanying the quenelle "football" on the sweet potato "gridiron" were sausage patties, actually links that Carone sliced and fried. Using pork from Circle W Farms in Waughtown, Carone ground the meat in his own grinder at his home in King. "It's so easy!" he says. "You can do it in under ten minutes." So easy, in fact, that Carone has developed some lamb sausage profiles to offer to friends who keep Kosher, though casings for them are tricky to find in these parts. And the casings, or caul fat are key. In order to achieve the larger size he desired for this challenge, Carone sourced some sheets of caul fat from a fellow sausage lover, and shaped them. (Pigskin, anyone?) When making any sausage, he says he likes to go easy on the salt, so the basic flavors of the meat can shine.

Finishing off the plating, Carone then fashioned a salad of arugula, also from the Triad Farmers Market and situated it on the "end zone" portion of his edible football field. Assisting Carone in the organization, chopping and cleanup were two classmates, first-year student Haley Bird and second-year student Nicole Summers. "They seemed to enjoy the food, too," Carone observes, adding that "Everything turned out way better than I had anticipated." Touchdown!





Brian Anderson

EXECUTIVE CHEF, EMERYWOOD FINE FOODS, HIGH POINT

Among diners at Emerywood Fine Foods in High Point there's a not-so-exclusive group called the Clean Plate Club, and Brian Anderson, the restaurant's executive chef, does everything in his power to attract new "members." His creations for the challenge will likely appear on Emerywood's menu — and make his dishwashers' jobs a lot easier.

What could be more classic than shrimp and grits? Instead of the usual Andouille sausage, Anderson simply made meatballs out of a local favorite, Neese's, and let its inherent spice work magic. Apart from a little white wine, he didn't stray too far from the traditional recipe calling for salt, pepper and butter.

For the sweeter companion to the savory, Anderson was a little more adventurous. "I took some sweet potatoes, seasoned them with vanilla, nutmeg and cinnamon," he says, "and made a cake covered in house-made granola," a combination of oats baked in sugar, brown cinnamon and honey, mixed together with panko bread crumbs in a food processor and pan-seared. He added a honey-infused béchamel, a dollop of house-made fig jam on the side, and to cut the sweetness of all the flavors, topped the cake with a salad of arugula and red peppers, dressed in balsamic vinegar and olive oil with a garnish of almond slivers. All of the ingredients, he says, came from the North Carolina section of his local Harris Teeter. "I wanted to make something nice and elegant. I also wanted to make a dish that tastes good, where all the flavors go together," Anderson explains. "Sweet potatoes complement the honey, honey complements the figs, put it all together, they complement each other." Aesthetics figured into Anderson's calculation as well: "The pretty colors in the sweet potatoes and honey remind me of the fall season right when the leaves are about to change, right when the weather is starting to change, when it starts getting dark around 5:15 or 5:30. You just want to be home, comfortable, warm, with something nice to eat."

Or at Emerywood Fine Foods, where, no doubt, you'll send your plate back to the kitchen, gleaming.

Trey Bell

EXECUTIVE CHEF AND OWNER, LA RUE

“I like limitations,” says Trey Bell, owner and executive chef of La Rue in downtown. “When you’re a chef, and you cook for other people all night, you get home and you don’t cook too much,” he says. Recalling the early days of his career, Bell explains how his wife Cheryl would clean out the fridge on his days off. “She’d lay out all the stuff I’d have to cook and I’d have to come up with something.” So *O.Henry’s* proposal of using five local ingredients appealed to the former college athlete’s competitive streak. “I always push my own boundaries,” he says.

Bell — and his “pirate crew,” sous-chef Daniel Rider and demi-sous chef Kevin Cottrell — certainly tested the boundaries with two dishes — and in La Rue’s kitchen, which has no open flame, only a food dehydrator, induction burners, immersion circulators and a blow torch. “Breakfast,” is Bell’s spin on boudin blanc, a Louisiana dish consisting of sausage stuffed with rice. In this case, he ground up pork belly from Berkshire pork raised “a couple of counties away,” and combined it with the Old Mill Grits. “We took dry grits and added that in as cornmeal, and flash-fried it,” he explains. For greens, Bell made a gratina of sheep sorrel — that he foraged himself on his farm in Summerfield and seasoned with rosemary and thyme — a fresh note to the grit-and-sausage balls. As part of the presentation, he served it with toast topped with a compote of raspberries, blackberries and verjus, the pressed juice of unripened grapes.

For “dessert,” Cottrell whipped up a sweet potato mousse and shaped it into a quenelle. “That’s a big thing: Do a quenelle and press into it,” he says, pointing to the imprint in the shape into which he poured honey caramel — made with honey that Bell harvested from his own apiary (see “The Honeydrippers” p. 68). “I like using local,” Bell says. “I think foods taste better when they’re at their optimal time.” The sweet potatoes came from a neighbor up the road from his farm, and in addition to the base for the mousse, were used as a garnish, alongside a cremeux of blueberry, dollops of yuzu curd and dustings of powdered honey, powdered King’s Hawaiian streusel and edible blueberry pistachio soil. It is now a plated dessert on LaRue’s latest menu.

If this is limitation, we’ll gladly order more. **OH**

