
THE LOCAL BOUNTY

CURED!

Happiness in the age of garlic.

BY MELISSA WALDRON LEHNER

“It is not really an exaggeration to say that peace and happiness begin, geographically, where garlic is used in cooking.

—French chef X. Marcel Boulestin (1873–1943)

“Ay...Maria!” exclaimed an Italian woman upon entering the airy tobacco barn at the Garlic Farm in West Granby, Connecticut, gazing at the heaps of garlic surrounding her. “Oh my goodness, that’s a lot of garlic!”

Dracula would definitely not be comfortable at all in this place. A whole season’s worth of garlic hangs from the rafters, fresh garlic bulbs flow out of baskets and garlic braids hang overhead, draped with beautiful dried flowers of all colors.

A wheelbarrow full of 10-pound bags of garlic rested in the corner. The Italian woman and her sister grab two.

Sitting in the rocking chair next to a stack of books on the wonders of garlic, I asked, perhaps foolishly, “What do you do with 20 pounds of garlic?”

She looked at me with a large smile. “You eat it!!” Then Barbara smiled, and they all laughed, as if I were asking if the earth were flat.



RECIPE

ROASTED HARDNECK GARLIC

4 heads of garlic
olive oil

Preheat oven to 350°. Peel away the dry outer layers of skin from each bulb. Leave skins of cloves intact. Cut off the top pointed end of the cloves, leaving the bulb intact but exposing each clove. Place the garlic, cut side up, in a garlic roaster or aluminum foil. Drizzle olive oil over the bulbs (about 2 tablespoons for each head). Cover and bake for 1 hour, then uncover the garlic for 20 minutes to slightly brown the bulbs. Allow the heads to cool slightly before handling. Squeeze the soft garlic from the cloves onto your favorite bread or cracker and discard skins.

Roasted garlic can be refrigerated to have on hand for seasoning many dishes.

Smiles abound at the Garlic Farm. Barbara Miller, co-owner, smiles from one end of the day to the other, flashing a mouthful of pearly whites to whoever walks into her store. When I openly note her unusual exuberance, she claims, “It’s the garlic! It makes people happy—they miss it if they don’t have it.”

And many people *are* afraid they will miss out on their part of the freshly harvested, cured garlic, which is why droves of people come to purchase those 10-pound bags. Barbara proudly proclaims that they sold out by mid-September last year.

They started selling 10-pound bags when customers were leaving their farmstand with armfuls of garlic. 10 pounds may sound like a lot to you and me, but it is apparently an unexceptional amount to Barbara and Gary Cirullo (who run the farm together), since they claim to consume 50 pounds of the heady herb over the course of one winter. Are they exaggerating? Well when they invited me to eat lunch with them on their front porch, I watched bulb after bulb disappear—chopped, diced or crushed into every dish served, even in the tuna fish. They weren’t exaggerating. They eat it constantly.

Mostly, Barbara says, she eats it raw. She handed me a massive bulb, still wrapped in its tight crisp white wrapper. “Here, taste this,”

Photograph: Melissa Waldron Lehner



Barbara said. “You can’t write about it if you don’t try it!” I hesitated—I was expecting the stinging, eye-tearing experience of biting down on one of those cloves you find at the supermarket, the ones that come from far away places like China or South America. Instead what I encountered was a squirt first of sweet juice, then an avalanche of mild, nutty, sweet flavor cascaded down the insides of my mouth, finishing with a slight tang on the tongue—a pleasant experience, in other words. I felt a rush and my cheeks got hot. It made me want to eat more. Raw. I polished off three cloves.

If you eat garlic fresh from the ground, you might think it would be stronger in flavor. Not so, says Barbara. It’s actually milder. (Their garlic gets harvested in mid-July.) Curing the garlic, or, rather, hanging it to air dry for a few weeks, allows the flavors to cultivate and get spicier. Barbara has tried growing many different kinds of garlic but says she prefers the *German white* variety, which is all they grow these days. The *German white* provides huge cloves which makes peeling it all the easier. Only one row of cloves goes around the stalk. Barbara says that not only does this hard-neck variety (as opposed to a soft-neck, the kind you find in grocery stores) grow well in a cooler climate like Connecticut but it has great storage potential

(up to six-nine months) and great flavor (she recommends keeping the garlic in a cool and dry place, 50-65 degrees.) She hands out specific instructions on how to store it to all her customers.

Gary and Barbara are like proud parents when talking about their garlic. “You can’t buy this at a store,” says Barbara. That must explain why people come from all over the state to reap their garlic bounty. The Garlic Farm has become so well known among garlic lovers that these sturdy heads of pungency have been shipped to Florida, Texas and even Alaska. “But we ask people to buy it for their friends and ship it themselves, because we’re not set up for that yet.”

This destination farm has come a long way in the ten years that Gary and Barbara have been working the land. They started with only three small rows, selling garlic on the roadside. Now they have a farm, with several acres dedicated to garlic. The rest of their land is allocated to growing a myriad of tomatoes, onions, peppers, eggplant and flowers they also sell. Their shallots are coming in late this year in September, due to the heavy rains earlier this summer.

Barbara crunches on a paprika pepper (she says she can’t stop eating them) and shows me an array of tomatoes, starting with a bright red one the size of a large golf ball. Called the *Fourth of July*, she says they are really juicy and sweet, and so are the *First Lady* tomatoes which are slightly bigger. They also grow *beefsteak* tomatoes (“big beef”) which are fleshier and the *celebrity*, which is a happy medium.

She gives me a bunch of greenish-red paprika peppers to take home. “Wait till they turn really red, then cook with them.” She also encourages me to dry them out, then remove the seeds and grind them into a fine dust for my own paprika powder. Barbara is full of cooking suggestions. She points to the poblano peppers. “These are great roasted then canned in a jar with garlic and olive oil.”

Although they are not officially certified as an organic farm, Gary and Barbara adhere to a strict code of standards known as the Farmers Pledge, an honors-system arrangement with the Connecticut Northeast Organic Farming Association (CT NOFA) where the farmer agrees to reject the use of synthetic pesticides, conserve natural resources, and maintain healthy soils. Both fervently believe in producing their foods in the most natural way they can. And you can tell that by the way their food tastes, and by the way they and their customers, are always smiling. □

WHAT: The Garlic Farm
WHERE: 76 Simsbury Rd., West Granby, (860) 653-0291
WEBSITE: www.garlicfarmct.com
WHEN: July–October, Daily 10 a.m.–7 p.m.,
May–June, Fri.–Sun., 10 a.m.–3 p.m.