

## A Local Food Story

*By Britton Miller*

During the ten years my family and I lived in West Newbury, Massachusetts, there were two defining seasonal events each year. One was the quintessential New England fall apple harvest at the local orchard, protected as agricultural land several years before by the state's Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program. Apple-picking at the orchard was right off of a Division of Tourism postcard, complete with clear, crisp bright blue skies, golden leaves, red apples dotting the trees, and cheerful people in cable-knit sweaters sneaking a taste or two while they carefully twisted the apples off of the trees.

The other important happening was the spring tilling of the fields at Brown Spring Farm on Rt. 113 at the edge of town. The tilling symbolized summer, complete with bloodthirsty mosquitoes, intolerable heat, and corn so sweet that it barely needed cooking. But knowing that the corn was coming made everything else pale as minor irritants in the grand scheme of the amazing food to come.

I drove by the farm each day on my way to town, anticipating the progress in the fields. It seems that in New England, plants grow at incredible speeds in their race against the first frost. Maybe we just paid closer attention after the long, bleak winter, but either way, the rows of green seedlings, at first generic in color, shape and size, became tall and recognizably distinct in a matter of weeks. Corn, tomatoes, basil, carrots, zucchini, yellow squash, tomatoes, onions, eggplant, peppers, potatoes, pole beans covered the fields.

With the car windows down, the smell of green and soil would fill the car when we drove by. I day-dreamed of fresh vegetable soup, Southern-style pole beans with ham, briefly-boiled corn and sliced tomatoes, roasted new potatoes with olive oil and sea salt, steamed summer squash sprinkled with parmesan, and my very favorite farm-fresh dish of all time, ratatouille.

As the plants grew taller and began to fill out, the farmstand got a fresh coat of white paint. The gravel parking area with room for only four cars, was graded and raked. The reds, yellows, greens, purples of the vegetables decorated the fields.

And finally, after waiting all winter, the farm flag was hanging from the farmstand, signaling the first harvest of the summer, tended and picked daily by the farmers, who were also our neighbors. The small wooden bins would be filled with just a few veggies to start, but all of us who lived in the area would stop for what was grown in the same soil that held our homes, our ancient lilac bushes and our struggling grass. The same soil where our kids played ball and dug for worms and had their first kiss. Those veggies tasted like so much more than food.

### **Recipe: Janine's Ratatouille**

2 large eggplants  
4-5 zucchini  
3 large green peppers  
2 large onions  
8-10 cloves of garlic  
3 fresh tomatoes or 1 large can of plum tomatoes

Slice eggplants into 1-inch circles, then slice each circle into about 6 wedges. Slice Zucchini and tomatoes (peel if using fresh tomatoes) into 1-inch circles. Cut green peppers into 1-inch squares. Slice onions and garlic into thin slices.

Spread green peppers and zucchini in a large roasting pan. Toss in olive oil. Roast at 400 degrees for 10 minutes. Add eggplant and toss in a little more olive oil. Roast for 8 more minutes. Add tomatoes (and juice if using canned), onions and garlic. Toss carefully with other vegetables to avoid breaking up eggplant. Add more olive oil if necessary. Add ½ tsp. of dried thyme. Add sea salt and pepper to taste. Roast for 20-30 minutes, until vegetables are tender, carefully tossing vegetables a few times.

Allow pan to sit 15 minutes before serving. Wonderful with fish, chicken, or on pasta (with a little parmesan on top). Also delicious cold.