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And yes, he admits, that means putting on a little weight. Gray believes that preparing for winter is a primal thing, whether we like it or not.

Surrender, compulsive dieters. From the Northeast to the Mid-Atlantic, there's no better time to indulge in the local bounty. Mild temperatures, mesmerizing colors and seasonal rituals are viable competition for the BlackBerry. Sure, the days are getting shorter and school and football interfere, but take the time to have a fall fling. The chance comes around only once a year.

A favorite yearly ritual for restaurateur Donatella Arpaia is canning Roma tomatoes. When she was growing up in Woodmere, Long Island, her mother, an immigrant from the southern Italian region of Puglia, maintained a tomato closet. Stacking it with 150 Mason jars of fresh tomato sauce was a process that took two days and involved the whole family. The sauces would last all year until the next tomato season.

"I have wonderful childhood memories of it," says Arpaia, who runs the hip, elegant **Davidburke & Donatella**, and **Dona**, in Manhattan. "It's a beautiful tradition. In the wintertime you're remembering the taste of summer."

To preserve and share that tradition—without chemical preservatives—Arpaia is

continued on page 58

CAFÉ CHATTER

Green Acre
A food writer and her green-thumbed husband turn their suburban house into a farmers market (sort of) **By Elizabeth Johnson**

The epiphany came on the porch, during a Saturday afternoon lunch of peas and beans picked five minutes before.

My husband and I looked down at our crops. In just 60 square feet of dirt, we had our lettuce, our tomatoes, our Brussels sprouts. We had collards, radishes, zucchini and peppers. An herb bed was filled with everything from tarragon to Thai basil.

After years of seeking out farms at local markets, we realized we had one of our own—and we named it Sour Cherry.

The name started with three pints of preserves. I stumbled upon sour cherries at my local farmers market.



It's a fruit that bruises so easily it can't travel, with a season so short a week's vacation would mean you'd miss it.

I made three jars of jam, then waited 48 weeks to make more. While I was waiting, I began to understand that to eat local, seasonal food was to enjoy life at its pace.

June came around again, so did the sour cherries, so did the preserves. After the third year, it became a tradition. The year after that, my husband, Greg Weber, and I gave away 150 tiny jars as wedding favors.

When we bought our home in the Hudson Valley, the first thing we

PHOTOS COURTESY SOUR CHERRY FARM

Sour Cherry Farm's cherries start to form in mid-May. They're usually ready for harvest toward the end of June. Each summer, Johnson and Weber preserve the harvest. In 2006, they made more than 50 jars of sour cherry preserves.

planted was a sour cherry tree. Then we planted another. And a pear tree. And a plum. We tore up our front yard to make room for the crops, and in the spring, we had that epiphany.

Odds makers might have seen it coming: a guy who grew up on a family farm in Minnesota marries a food writer from New York. Greg's green thumb; my enthusiasm for what tastes good. The partnership always worked out great for our friends, who were happy to share in the harvest at our dinner parties.

But then the Web site came along; sourcherryfarm.com invites everyone to a virtual place at our table, and the little suburban lot we offhandedly called "the farm" really became one.

We chronicle our crops, photograph the progress in the orchard and share our Saturday night suppers. We give recipes for cocktails made with seasonal herbs, and explain the particulars of butterfly-flying a chicken. We demonstrate where to place the charcoal in a Weber kettle (no relation) for indirect cooking, and



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mass marketing a puréed passata as well as three ready-to-serve versions: marinara, puttanesca and arrabbiata.

In Puglia, Italy, sauce-making takes place in the fall. Each family cans their own tomatoes, according to its own family recipe.

"There's nothing like sauce made from late-summer tomatoes, but canning is too time-consuming for most people," Arpaia says. To make it easier for everyone, she signed on with Whole Foods to be the exclusive purveyor of Donatella's Essential Sauce until October, when her products will be sold nationwide. Go to donatellastyle.com for more details.

Another strong ritual, Thanksgiving, is just around the corner, and to get you in the mood consider a visit to **Griggstown Quail Farm** not far from the Princeton Junction station. The farm is home to 75,000 free-range turkey, quail, pheasant, duck and poussin.

"These magnificent birds are quite a sight to see," says Jim Weaver, the executive chef and owner of **Tre Piani** in Princeton. Weaver and Griggstown farmer George Rude co-host an all-bird barbecue every October. Griggstown supplies the birds, and Tre Piani whips up a buffet of freshly harvested New Jersey produce and homemade fruit pies. Weaver describes it as a big family day with hayrides, farm tours and live music. "We take full advantage of the fall harvest," says Weaver. And so should we all.



how to plant the seeds for spring's first radish crop.

Of course we can't grow everything ourselves—we are omnivores, after all—so we still shop at our local farmers market for other fruits and vegetables, for artisan breads and local cheeses and for organic, pasture-raised meats. But we photograph what we bring home, and invite readers to the table. Our shopping trips have turned into a weekly feature on sourcherryfarm.com called Farmers Market Loot.

Greg and I always tried to eat what was in season in the Hudson

(Top) Johnson and Weber harvest cabbage to make sauerkraut in the fall. (Bottom) Radishes are among the first crops Sour Cherry Farm harvests in the spring, but they're planted in rotation for a new batch every three weeks.

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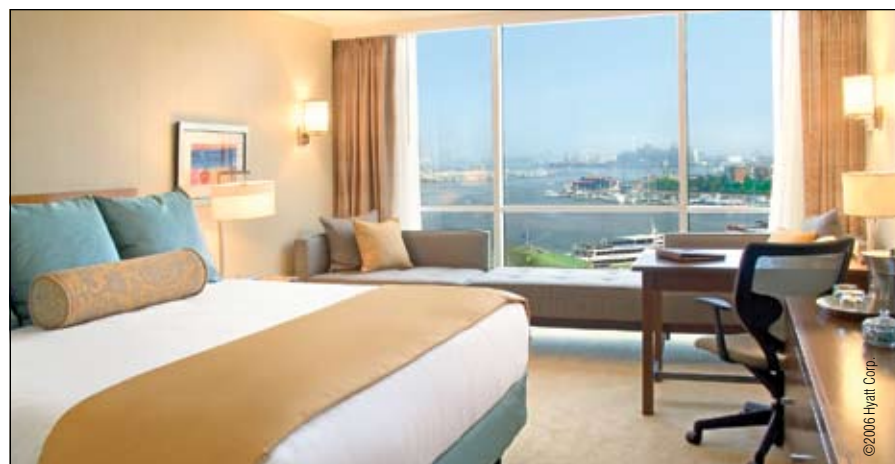
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Valley, but now that we're growing the produce—and photographing it—the goal has become twofold: to archive what's in season when, and to teach it to readers. And so Sour Cherry Farm has become more than a diary. It's an experience, where voyeurs begin to understand that putting the effort into sourcing the best ingredients can make something magical.

Like when October brought the last crop of cabbage. Greg shredded it up and salted it down. Eight weeks later, the fire roaring, we hosted a dinner party where the star was choucroute: our homemade sauerkraut, plated with an array of hand-crafted German sausages.

Each August, we share an annual "eat local" dinner with like-minded friends. Nothing on our table—from the corn to the chicken to the tomatoes to the fresh goat cheese—comes from farther than 150 miles away. For the last two years, we've even been serving New York State wine—Finger Lakes rieslings and Long Island merlots, especially.

Our empty vases are filled by the seasons, too. When we threw a 25th anniversary party for my parents last November, we didn't call a florist. We foraged the farm for branches with blazing red leaves and tied silver ribbons around the necks of gourds. Five years ago, even my wedding bouquet was filled with herbs.



Not all the reports on sourcherryfarm.com are about growing food and cooking it. The motto of our site is "Eat. Drink. Live." And we figure the "live" part allows for flexibility.

A post might critique an elegant eight-course tasting menu, or it might share photos of the burger and Buffalo wings we ordered at the local pub. We've taken the camera on a walking tour of our Hudson River village, to dinner parties at my folks' house (which we've dubbed "The Ranch"), to toddlers' birthday parties, to family vacations in Texas and Tennessee, and to Manhattan every chance we get.

We have taken to podcasting important events, too—ones that shape Sour Cherry Farm, like the passing of my grandmother, who used to jot down every meal she ate on vacation in a tiny spiral notebook. Or this year's effort at sour

cherry preserves—pitting and stemming 10 pounds all the while. Or the 80th birthday of Greg's mom, who this summer called asking for our recipe for sour cherry preserves.

Here's what I told her: take 3 pounds of sour cherries, 2 tablespoons lemon juice and 1 cup of sugar. Bring it to a boil and let the sugar melt. Then add 1½ cups more.

That's the thing about sour cherries—you have to add sugar, just not too much. After all those preserves, we came to realize that though sour cherries epitomize the ephemeral nature of a season's harvest, they also happen to be quite a good metaphor for marriage. They take a bit of effort—you have to add sugar. They need to be treated gingerly, because they're fragile and bruise easily. And their season may be fleeting, but you can keep them for a very long time if you make the effort to preserve them. — Elizabeth Johnson is the food editor at The Journal News in Westchester County, N.Y. She has contributed to Food &



Sour Cherry Farm is never far away from hors d'oeuvres for unexpected guests. Weber and Johnson serve them with buttered bread and salt. Parmesan cheese and Picholine olives come from the local gourmet shop.

Wine and Fodor's Travel Guides, and is a James Beard Foundation Restaurant Awards judge.

DOWNLOAD THIS: sourcherryfarm.com. Click on "Get Podcast" on the left column. Select "On the Farm: Episode 1."

