



Bring a Dish

COMMUNITY POTLUCKS SHARE FOOD AND EXPERIENCES // BY AMY COTLER

WITH ITS stunning settings and bountiful harvest, the Berkshires has all the right ingredients for potluck parties. Covered dishes of varied recipes, tasty enough to stand up to any farm-to-table restaurant, create sumptuous spreads for our tight-knit community to share. Our homes sprawl easily from kitchen to table, lending themselves to casual entertaining, satisfying our need to fill them with family and friends.

My 30 years here have been punctuated by such potluck suppers. In the cold months,

while the snowy wind battered our windows, we gathered by candlelight, dining on warm bowls of dishes like vegetable curry, surrounded by abundant sides brought by friends. Late summers, we lounged, often in the green of our backyards, grilling our surplus zucchini with whatever we felt like flipping.

Years ago, a group of kindred spirits gathered round the table in Saint Stephen's church in Pittsfield. It was our October potluck-dinner meeting with the core members of what would become Berkshire Grown, a nonprofit

supporting local food and farms. Clearly, we hadn't planned ahead since most of us brought apple pie—using local produce, of course, most likely from Jaeschke's in Adams or Bartlett's in Richmond. Startled for a moment at the dessert buffet set before us, we all plunged in. No one complained—the tangy-sweet apples crooned in their buttery crusts.

Soon after, the same group planned three dinners throughout the Berkshires. "Moveable feasts" we called them, with complete meals this time. The goal was

to share the local harvest, celebrate our farms, and spark the local food movement in our backyard. Hundreds gathered, breaking bread as a community.

Come winter, our internationally themed potlucks were especially jolly. During one exceptionally long cold spell, we fought off the blues by turning our kitchen into a Moroccan getaway. Rugs and cushions replaced tables and chairs, lace curtains were taped inside our snowy windows. Chicken with preserved lemons was joined by savory dishes brought by friends. The smell of spices perfumed

our kitchen, and we were transported.

During another relentless winter some 25 years ago, we gathered at a friend's Victorian home for a Chinese-themed New Year's Eve feast. As ever, cooks and novices alike put their best food forward in one dish—all culminating in a potluck celebration overflowing the buffet table. After we'd gobbled the ducks—which I'd massaged with spices, steamed, and deep-fried for the occasion—I made the announcement. Our adoptive daughter was soon to arrive. To celebrate, our host slipped outside to shoot off champagne corks in his snowy yard. Long after the last snow melted, a few stray corks were found in the spring tulip beds, triggering warm memories of that New Year's feast and our thrilling announcement.

A few years later, when my daughter was quite young, we went Greek. I bartered a case of beer with the butcher in town for his hand-cranked rotisserie, and my husband dug the pit for the lamb. Friends were invited to come as their favorite gods and goddesses. One came in a sheet-toga with a little pocket from which he pulled a business card label "Zeus." Another strolled in as Jackie "O" in giant sunglasses and a tightly wrapped headscarf.

It was Mount Olympus that day in our backyard—deep, green grass; puffy clouds; and a slight breeze. Sawhorses topped with slabs of old plywood scraps were

covered with Greek foods and food inspired by our local harvest. Peter Platt, from the Old Inn on the Green in New Marlborough, carved the lamb.

For me, the Berkshires and potlucks forever mingle. My years here are characterized by all kinds of potlucks, some classic, like Fourth of July barbecues that finished with our children chasing fireflies in the backyard. And each year, when the kids were still young, we visited Tanglewood on Parade. Spreading our picnics, we'd eye more elaborate displays—the Berkshire version of a tailgate party—while they safely ran the grounds.

Later, we ate freshly baked, wild-picked berry cobbler and, once again, too-much-in-the-garden zucchini bread at book clubs, spaghetti Puttanesca on movie nights, gorp after blustery hikes up Mount Greylock with the "girls," and Indian food on my husband's birthdays. And sadly, we gathered at giant potluck funerals, where people expressed tenderness with their culinary offerings.

Two summers ago, our rustic colonial home with its welcoming Berkshire kitchen sold. There, at our last potluck, our daughter arrived—all grown up, tall, and startlingly pretty—calling the setting edenic, or eden-like. Guests drifted in to say goodbye. And in Berkshire potluck fashion, each joined the gathering, bringing friendship and food to share.