



Vinaigrette makes simple dishes stand out

By RACHEL ELLNER, Correspondent

My conversation with Nancy Brown, from Three Acre Kitchen in Hopkinton, started to get especially interesting when she described her "leftover salads."

These "salads" are mixtures of whatever has gotten pushed to the far reaches of the refrigerator, along with some fresh pickings from the farmers market. One such combination she mentioned - previous meals' pasta and refried beans, along with fresh apple and greens - at first seemed like random shopping-list items. But when Brown said they tasted delicious together with her balsamic vinaigrette, I could imagine how it might work.

"I'm inspired by the visual aspects of food," she says. But the mild-tasting Three Acre Kitchen balsamic vinaigrette is more than just a cure-all for leftovers.

Since our talk in June at the Fancy Food Show in New York, where Brown had her dressings on display, her vinaigrette has been a constant companion in the kitchen. My usual leftovers are often too heavy a mess of ingredients to be brought together by any type of dressing. But over a steamed vegetable medley or a summer leafy green salad with fresh fruit, the vinaigrette provided a light, lush sweetness that wasn't overpowering.

The best fits for the vinaigrette were the simpler pairings that Brown suggested: greens with pears and Gorgonzola, or greens, sprouts pine nuts and mandarin oranges.

"Add a protein to it, and you have a whole dinner," Brown says.

It was over single ingredients that the delicate taste came through - this is not as deep a balsamic vinegar as some, nor is the olive oil used of a heavy sort.



Where to buy

The Three Acre Kitchen vinaigrette sells at:

- Lull Farm, 615 Route 13, Milford. 673-3119.

- Brookdale Farm, 38 Broad St, Hollis. 465-2241.

Drizzled over fresh sliced tomatoes was the greatest triumph. It also worked well over roasted beets and another time sauteed in a skillet with baby turnips. With steamed kale, it was also surprisingly good. The idea isn't to mask the taste of these farm-fresh ingredients like a creamy dressing might do - we have all winter long for that.

Talk to farmers at the market, and they'll often tell of the simplest preparations they make that come just short of eating vegetables or fruit straight off the vines.

"A lot of lemon and butter, not too complicated" is how Ben Brewster likes the young Brussels sprouts he picks off their stalks on his farm in Amherst.

Chris Cady, from Country Dreams Farm in Mason, manages the most basic chemistry with his heirloom cucumbers: "Half a cup white vinegar, half a cup water, half a cup sugar - mix it together, chop up an onion, throw it in, add cucumber slices, throw it in. Let it sit on the counter overnight."

The craft of such made-to-order simplicity is on display at Friday night barbecues at Longhaul Farm in Holderness, where Lorri Downs' enthusiasm for feeding large gatherings runneth over: "We braise greens with garlic and extra-virgin olive oil, and saute them in a gigantic skillet. It's so simple. It's kale, collards, mustard greens and Swiss chard for color. We harvest it. Rinse it and saute it. It's very popular."

Simpler yet are the squash, peppers and onions grilled on the open fire and simply seasoned with garden herbs and oil. All of such talk brings to mind more ideas for using Brown's vinaigrette.

Brown got her earliest encouragement at her local farmers market.

"At the end of the season, I had people with panicked looks in their eyes: 'How am I going to get through the winter?' "

That's when she decided the timing was right to make it available year-round, but still using ingredients she knows and likes.

"We're able to use good quality ingredients because we're small and use specific brands," Brown says. "We don't use the 55-gallon drums of things."

"We open a lot of 5-liter containers of olive oil and balsamic vinegar and a lot of gallons of mustards," she says. "The brands we use were chosen because of the quality of the taste and how they combine together. Some varieties of virgin olive oil are too heavy for what we wanted. The ones we use are especially good for salads."

It's in keeping with Brown's sensibilities, though, that she likes to bring disparate flavors together, just as she likes to bring people together, sometimes ones who might not be hitting it off.

Brown talks about the years she worked as a mediator, her conflict resolution training, family training of parents and her running of nonprofits, all of which helped develop the skills to run a business ("I can do an excellent spreadsheet," she says).

Brown's warmth and generosity comes across as she speaks.

"When you live in a community where you could die, you need a community of hospitality willing to bail you out," she says. "If you get stuck on a snowy night in sub-zero weather, you count on your neighbors to get you home."

But thoughts of snowy nights are still months away. For now, at least, her insistence is on bringing good people and good food to the table.

"Life is about welcoming people into your hearth and home," she says. Good food presumably comes next: "I've always loved mixing food together. . . . If you work really hard at a salad and put on it something ordinary, you've wasted your time."