

# Foodies and farmers

Cooking classes connect home chefs with people who produce the food

By [JENNIFER GISH](#), Staff writer

First published: Thursday, March 20, 2008

It was a different kind of cooking class. Rather than simply discussing how long to marinate an assortment of raisins in wine or when to place the artisan-style sausage on the flatbread crust, class members were talking about the merits of heritage breed pigs and pasture-raised beef and lamb.



Cynthia Nicholson of Rensselaerville demonstrates her pizza, made with sausage from Heather Ridge Farm in Schoharie County. (Michael P. Farrell / Times Union)



Cynthia Nicholson of Rensselaerville demonstrates her red grape, gorgonzola and sausage flatbread pizza during cooking class The Farmhouse Table. (Michael P. Farrell / Times Union)

Carol Clement, owner of Heather Ridge Farm, leaned against Cynthia Nicholson's wide kitchen island one Saturday as she talked to a dozen participants about the natural practices she uses on her farm in Preston Hollow, Schoharie County.

Nicholson calls her business The Farmhouse Table, and it's devoted to linking foodies with farmers, whether she's leading tours of Italy, where her clients can pick and press olives at small farms, or she's hosting local-food cooking classes at her Rensselaerville home and allowing farmers to showcase their products in the recipes she demonstrates.

"That's the really great thing about using a lot of fresh, local food," Nicholson said as she pulled together three recipes featuring pork, including a red grape and Gorgonzola flatbread topped with Clement's Asiago-parsley-garlic sausage and a "Frenchified" pork and dried plums served over polenta from a local mill. "It doesn't need a lot done to it. You do not need to be covering up the flavors."

Nicholson held her first class four years ago after meeting Clement at a community event. She had become interested in local and naturally raised food while researching for a book proposal, and became even more dedicated to the cause after tasting some of the meat raised on Clement's farm.

"I had not tasted the pork of my childhood until I had tasted Carol's pork four years ago," said Nicholson, who grew up in an area of the South where fresh food was readily available. "(On) the corporate farms in America, the pork has become so tasteless. They're bred to be lean, and there's no telling what they feed them, and it was a real revelation for me."

Clement, who sells her beef, pork, lamb, chicken, turkey, eggs and honey at her farm-based store, said interest in local food has increased since she led the first class for Nicholson four years ago. She attributed local food awareness to a perfect storm of factors, including a demand for higher-end foods, a desire to become less fossil fuel dependent by buying local, and health concerns about mass-produced food.

"All of these forces are coming together from very different directions. That has created kind of a movement," Clement said.

The challenge is connecting the public with farmers, and farmers markets and cooking classes like the ones hosted by Nicholson are becoming more common.

Nicholson, a former food editor for Real Simple and Country Living magazines, has a slate of classes planned for The Farmhouse Table this year, including sheep's milk cheese with Dancing Lamb Farm in Earlton, Greene County, and recipes featuring honey with Partridge Ridge Farm & Apiary in Berne. Each session, which costs \$40, runs from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. on scheduled Saturdays and includes a sampling of the recipes being demonstrated. Clement will be back March 29 for a class on cooking with grass-fed beef.

Nicholson also plans to host a **tour of Montreal in August**, which is focused on the area's artisan cheese makers.

## **Red Grape and Gorgonzola Flatbread**

Makes 18 (3-inch) squares

From Cynthia Nicholson

1 bag of fresh pre-made pizza dough or 1 can of refrigerated pizza dough

Page 2 of 3)

Olive oil

2 cups raisins or sliced red grapes or a combination of both

Sweet wine, such as vin santo, passito or Marsala

3/4 to 1 pound Italian-style Heather Ridge Farm sausage

1 tablespoon fennel seed or chopped fresh rosemary, optional

1/2 cup crumbled Gorgonzola cheese or smoked provolone or Asiago

Place pizza dough in a medium-size bowl and lightly coat with olive oil. Heat oven to 425 degrees. Let dough come to room temperature, 30 to 45 minutes.

Hydrate raisins in bowl with small amount of sweet wine or brandy. (Cover with plastic wrap and zap in microwave for 1 minute.) Set aside.

Place a large skillet over medium-high heat. Remove casings from sausage and crumble into skillet. Saute sausage until cooked through and brown. Drain well on a paper towel.

Lightly coat a 12-by-17-inch rimmed baking pan with olive oil or cooking spray. Gently press pizza dough into baking pan, covering entire surface. Sprinkle pizza dough evenly with fennel seed or rosemary, then raisins and/or grapes, and finally the Italian sausage.

Place flatbread in oven and bake 8 minutes. Remove from oven and sprinkle with Gorgonzola. Bake another 5 to 7 minutes, or until flatbread is golden brown. Slice into 18 3-inch squares. Serve warm.

## **Frenchified Pork and Dried Plums**

Makes 6 to 8 servings

From Cynthia Nicholson

1 (12-ounce) package pitted prunes

2 cups red wine

3 1/2 to 4 pounds boneless country-style ribs, or pork stew meat, cut into chunks

2 teaspoons salt

2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper

1 to 2 tablespoons butter  
1 to 2 tablespoons oil  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
2 bay leaves  
4 cups chicken broth  
2 tablespoons brandy  
2 tablespoons half-and-half or heavy cream

In a small bowl, combine the prunes and red wine; set aside. Toss the pork with the salt and pepper.

Place the butter and oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Sear the pork until brown, working in batches. Add the garlic, stirring well, and cook for 1 minute. Add the prunes, wine and bay leaves, stirring to combine. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook, covered, for 5 minutes.

Stir in 2 cups of the broth, partially cover and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Uncover and add the remaining broth, stirring well. Let simmer for 1 hour or until the pork is tender. Remove from heat. Stir in the brandy and half-and-half. Serve warm over thick slices of toasted country-style bread or polenta.

## **Roasted Italian Pork Spare Ribs**

Makes 4 servings

Adapted by Carol Clement from Bruce Aidells' "Complete Book of Pork: A Guide to Buying, Storing, and Cooking the World's Favorite Meat."

2 tablespoons coarse sea salt  
2 teaspoons ground black pepper  
1 teaspoon red pepper flakes  
1 tablespoon chopped fresh sage (or 1/2 tablespoon, dried)  
1 tablespoon fennel seeds  
1 tablespoon pressed garlic  
1 tablespoons chopped fresh rosemary (or 1/2 tablespoon, dried)  
1 teaspoon paprika  
2 tablespoons olive oil  
1 cup water or white wine  
2 teaspoons balsamic vinegar, optional  
1 (2- to 3-pound) slab of Heather Ridge Farm spare ribs

Make a rub by combining sea salt, black pepper, red pepper flakes, sage, fennel seeds, garlic, rosemary, paprika and olive oil. Pat the rub on both sides of the ribs. Let sit at room temperature for 2 hours or wrap in plastic and refrigerate overnight.

Heat oven to 275 degrees. Place slab of ribs, meat side up, in a large baking dish or pan, add cup of water or wine to bottom and cover with tin foil. Bake for 2 hours.

Remove foil, pour off almost all of the pan drippings and set aside. Turn spare ribs over. Increase heat to 375 degrees and bake uncovered for 20 minutes. Turn spare ribs again and continue baking another 15 minutes. Drizzle with balsamic vinegar, if desired, and bake another 5 minutes. Remove from oven, let rest for 10 minutes and serve.

# Get a taste of local cooking



For more on classes at The Farmhouse Table or for information on upcoming culinary trips, visit <http://www.farmhousetable.net>. The classes meet from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. in Rensselaerville. Each session costs \$40 and includes a sampling of the demonstrated dishes:

March 29: Grass-fed beef with Carol Clement from Heather Ridge Farm

April 19: Honey with Richard Ronconi, Partridge Run Farm & Apiary

April 26: Gluten-free cooking with Rachel Ginther, Garden of One

May 3: Sheep's milk cheese with Mike Kelly, Dancing Lamb Farm

June 28: Raw food with Rachel Ginther, Garden of One

July 19: Pasture-raised lamb with Cheryl Baitsholts, Baitsholts Farm

July 26: Vegetarian cooking with Rob Sweeney and Rachel Ginther

Call Cynthia Nicholson at 797-5154 or e-mail [tropicalstormcindy@earthlink.net](mailto:tropicalstormcindy@earthlink.net) to register or for more information.

To learn more about Heather Ridge Farm, 989 Broome Center Road in Preston Hollow, visit <http://www.heather-ridge-farm.com> or call 239-6234. Winter/spring farm store hours are 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. the second and fourth Saturday of every month. The farm store will be open this weekend (for its Easter sale).