
A SENSE OF PLACE

Chaffin Family Orchards

BY CAROL ALBRECHT

SPRING

Walking down from the pastures, I realize that this season we wait for all year is with us. Gone is the winter's valley fog, and view-diminishing pollution from summer's inversion layer has yet to arrive. The coast range is strikingly clear many miles across the valley. "Come and visit in the spring," we say all year long. "It is green, the weather is best, and we have many farm babies."

I search for familiar forages. Green and tender, they greet my eye, each with a promise. "Scissor grass" was a toy in childhood. I remember the day my high school agriculture teacher questioned us about its name and laughed at my childish reference to it. "Has more energy for a steer than grain," was his comment.

Back then, we knew that the compensatory gain from these annual forages kept the stockman around to ranch another year. Now we know that the healthy fat stored from these grasses provides the best grass-finished flavor and health benefits to meats, which in turn keep the consumer away from the doctor and pay an honorable wage to the rancher able to make use of them during the season.

Our farm animals move in a choreographed dance through and around the forage areas. Utilizing these tender forages during the spring spurt of fast growth has become the focus of many biodynamic and organic graziers in our part of the world. In this dance on our farm, we harvest this forage in many ways, visible during my evening walk. Cattle graze the longest sward first with their tearing action. Sheep follow behind, taking the grass from four inches to two. Goats come next, making use of the pasture weeds and thistles and keeping the trees trimmed close. Finally in this rotational dance come the young broilers, clipping off the shortest grasses, and the laying hens, cleaning the ground of bugs and seeds.



We offer the ground a well-deserved rest before the dance begins again. Rain and temperature conduct the movement of the animals' steps and the duration of the music. When the ground dries and the ever warmer sun begins to parch the forage, the animals move to irrigated pasture, and the grass makes one last spurt of growth that is saved in the field to feed the over-wintering stock in the fall.

Now, April, is the middle of the dance. The colors of annual flowers decorate the pastures, and young animals provide gaiety to the event. Steer calves grow before our eyes; young lambs and kids alternate between resting in the sun and playing effortlessly. Guardian dogs soak up the

first warmth of the year to nourish their bones from a winter of working cold and wet nights. Broiler chickens graze and then lie down with wing and leg stretched out to capture the sun's energy. The stockman works with ease, since mud no longer sucks hard at his boots and sweat does not yet mat his hair. The early mornings and late evenings of summer have yet to steal his rest. The sights of young animals romping and high value forage growing fuel his labor. Hope for the seasons ahead puts a spring in his step.

THE MEAL

At the end of these days, spring salads make use of the season. Not requiring a barbeque or much time away from the out of doors, they provide the perfect amount of fuel for simple labors. They can be fancied up some for visitors or left more plain for the home folk, as we like. The term "spring chicken" is never more apt than in April when the first of the season is harvested. Tender greens from the farmers' markets, proud first-of-the-season offerings from hopeful vendors, provide

Photos by Carol Topalian

a resting place for the chicken. Hard-boiled eggs, vibrant in color from spring forage and rich in taste, add punctuation. Lemon mayonnaise, made with the buttery oil of spring mission olives, increases both health benefits and flavor. Sourdough made from fermented grains adds a welcome heartiness that showcases raw spring butter. Hints of citrus from lemon, navel oranges, and Kombucha add a simple tang.

THE MENU

Salad of Spring Greens
Poached Pullet
Hard Cooked Pastured Eggs
Lemon Mayonnaise
Foothill Sourdough
Raw Spring Butter
Citrus Kombucha

THE STRATEGY

(Pullet, mayonnaise, and eggs can be prepared a day in advance.)

For the Pullet

Fresh spring chicken, raised on native grasses, is best chilled two to four days before poaching. Freezing without chilling for 48 hours will shorten the muscle fibers and cause the bird to toughen. After chilling two days post harvest, place the chicken, several carrots, 1 large onion, and 1 bouquet garni (12 parsley stems, 1 large sprig rosemary, 1 large sprig sage, 2 bay leaves, and two celery branches with leaves, all tied together with kitchen twine) in a tall, narrow stock pot with 4 quarts spring water and 3 tsp sea salt.

Bring the mixture to a boil over high heat. Cover, reduce heat to low, and boil gently for 30 minutes. Set the covered pot away from the heat and let the chicken poach in its broth for half an hour. Using a large skimmer, remove the chicken from the pot and allow it to cool a bit. Pick the meat from the chicken in large pieces and place on a platter, cover tightly and chill. Return the chicken bones to the pot with vegetables and water and bring back to a boil. Turn to a simmer and cook several hours, if not all day. Allow the stockpot to cool and then skim out and discard bones and vegetables. Strain the stock through a cheese-cloth lined strainer, pour into a tightly covered container and refrigerate. This will be a rich stock to have on one of spring's last chilly days.

For the Mayonnaise

Place one pastured egg (fresh egg of a chicken raised on clean grass pasture) in a blender or food processor, blend well, add 2 tsp of fresh lemon juice, 1 tsp sea salt, 1 tsp dry mustard, pinch cayenne, and ¼ tsp honey and continue to blend. With the machine at high speed spill one cup of lemon olive oil slowly into the mixture in a fine stream until no more oil can be emulsified. Tightly cover and chill the mayonnaise.

For the Eggs

A fresh egg from poultry on pasture is an amazing treat, dense and flavorful, with a deeply colored yolk. Unfortunately the freshest of eggs do not lend themselves to hard cooking because peeling is difficult. To have the best chance of peeling a fresh egg with the glistening white intact, add several tablespoons of sea salt to the water. At the conclusion of hard cooking, quickly immerse the eggs in a bath of cold iced water. Allow the eggs to cool completely before peeling for the salad.

Assembly

Cut the cooked chicken into bite-sized portions and, on a bed of fresh local spring greens, arrange the cooked chicken and wedges of hard-boiled egg. Obtaining organic greens is usually worth the effort and expense due to their higher brix score, an indication of sugar and mineral content, which intensifies the flavor. Drizzle with lemon mayonnaise, thinned with a small amount of additional lemon juice if necessary to achieve the desired consistency. Garnish with a few segments of seedless navel orange, peeled with the pith removed. Serve with slices of fresh foothill sourdough bread, made from fermented grains, and chunks of raw spring butter. If the day has a touch of coolness, the bread may be gently warmed. A cool glass of citrus Kombucha, a fermented and aged Chinese tea, brings out the citrus in the salad perfectly.

THE EXPERIENCE

Sitting down to a tender salad, offering the best of spring to our senses, is both restful and satisfying. The tang of citrus and the mellowness of chicken blend with smooth egg and rich oils. Fermented sourdough provides a platform for raw spring butter, one of the best offerings of quickly growing forages. While gazing out the window at orchard blossoms and cattle grazing on green hillsides, we begin to think of the seasons ahead. These sights offer a promise of sweet apricots, cherries, peaches, and beef on the barbeque, highlights of summer on the ranch. Perhaps it is not so bad that spring gives way to summer without fail. ❧

