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NOV-DEC 2022

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FEATURE

Showcasing Iowa's bounty

Written by **Terri Queck-Matzie**
Photography by **Conrad Schmidt**



Katie Porter gets energized and excited about food.

"I love what I do," says Porter. "I love connecting with people through food."

As chef and food program manager for the Wallace Centers of Iowa (WCI), Porter oversees food programming for the Wallace House in the Sherman Hills District of Des Moines. The Wallace House is the historic home of the Wallace family, four generations of leaders in agriculture and agriculture journalism.

At the Wallace House, Porter heads the kitchen for the tearoom, which features lunch and readings from historic women's section of Wallaces Farmer magazine.

The Wallace House also hosts Farm to Table Thursdays, which include three-course dinners; Know Your Farmer Dinners; and special events, all featuring local foods.

Porter was named one of 40 Women to Watch in 2022 by the Iowa Restaurant Association.

Eat Local

Katie Porter's specialty is local foods.

Dishes like roasted baby beet salad with orange vinaigrette or kohlrabi coconut slaw regularly appear on her menus, flavored to perfection with herbs grown in the Wallace Farm herb garden.

"The real key to cooking fresh vegetables is to not do much to them," says Porter. Iowa-grown produce speaks for itself. "Salt. A little spice here and there. Knowing what herbs pair well with what vegetables. You want to add a subtle hint of flavor, not mask the taste."

Much of the produce used by Porter is grown at the Wallace Farm near Orient in Adair County.

Wallace Farm is the birthplace of Henry A. Wallace, former vice president of the United States and secretary of agriculture under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The farm includes 4 acres of vegetable gardens and orchards amid restored prairie and outdoor art. The farm is best known for its popular Pizza on the Prairie nights throughout the summer.

In addition to Wallace Farm produce, Porter turns to Iowa farmers and direct marketers for menu inspiration.

The Wallace House's Know Your Farmer Dinners give diners the chance to meet and talk with the farmers who supply the ingredients.

"There's an energy in the room during those dinners," says Porter. "There are great conversations."

A recent Know Your Farmer Dinner menu featured pork, beef and popcorn from Rosmann Farms.

"The Know Your Farmer Dinner is a chance to connect with the consumer," says Ellen Rosmann. It's her first encounter with the Wallace House audience, but she's no stranger to promoting local foods.

Along with other family members, David and Ellen Rosmann raise certified organic beef,

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Katie was named one of 40 Women to Watch in 2022 by the Iowa Restaurant Association.



pork, chickens, eggs and popcorn on their farms near Harlan.

It starts on the farm

Chef Katie Porter understands farmers and their priorities.

Porter grew up in Mount Ayr in Ringgold County, studied at the Culinary Federation of Colorado Mountain College, then cooked her way around the world.

When she returned to southwest Iowa, she first connected with local producers before interviewing for the Wallace Centers of Iowa.

She knows each farmer she buys from and their farming practices.

"The one thing they all have in common is they care about the land and their animals and are committed to making the land better," says Porter. "When you love what you are doing, you gravitate to what you love and you care about how things are raised."

Using food fresh from the farm means minding the season — a challenge at times,

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but an exciting one, according to Porter. "It's so exciting to see those first nettles come up in the spring," says Porter, "or that first tomato. It's fun to use spring chives when you're out of stored onions to impart that flavor in a different way. Veggies seem more exciting when they're fresh from the garden. They taste better."

She relies on preserved garden goodness through the winter. Cabbages and root vegetables are harvested in late fall and stored for winter use. She oven-roasts and then freezes tomatoes, makes tomato puree and freezes cantaloupe with a bit of basil for a cantaloupe sorbet.

The key is knowing what you have, especially important when planning menus for 40-some guests at a time. Some items are givens — greens in the spring, carrots in the fall. Summer provides just about anything one could want. Porter receives a weekly email from the Wallace Farm's garden

production manager telling her what is available, then she reaches out to other providers to fill in gaps. Menus are adjusted accordingly.

The rise in local farms that direct market to consumers has made the process much easier in recent years.

"There are so many producers and products out there — from pork and beef to chickens and lamb to fruits and vegetables. They all fill a niche. Greenhouse-grown microgreens add a bit of freshness in the winter. Hydroponics growers provide lettuce and spinach year-round," says Porter.

The increase in growers has also upped consumer awareness of food quality and production, issues near and dear to the Wallace Centers' mission.

"We try to engage them in the larger picture," says Ann Taylor, vice president of marketing and development for the Wallace Centers of Iowa, "to put things in context

and see how the farm connects with larger issues like food systems and food security, then take that and make a difference in their own community. It's about understanding the challenges of food production and distribution and becoming part of the solution. That follows the Wallace family's philosophies."

"Now more than ever, people know where their food comes from," adds Porter. "Farmers telling their story and showing their production process through social media and other avenues have helped people see the real farm, not an idealized one, and that connects people to their food more than ever before. Through my kitchen and WCI, we plan to keep doing what we're doing and reach even more people."

Queck-Matzie is a freelance writer from Greenfield.



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Chef Katie's favorite holiday recipes

The holiday cocktail class at the Wallace House in Des Moines is always a hit. Rosemary orange whiskey is one of Chef Katie's favorites for the holiday season, as is her grandmother's cranberry relish recipe.

ROSEMARY ORANGE WHISKEY

- 1 **tablespoon** Rosemary Honey Syrup, recipe follows
- 2 **tablespoons** freshly squeezed orange juice
- 1 **shot** of whiskey

Fill a shaker half-way with ice. Place the syrup, orange juice and whiskey in the shaker, then shake 25 times. Pour into a coupe glass, low-ball glass, martini glass or any 4- to 6-ounce glass.

ROSEMARY HONEY SYRUP

- 1/2 **cup** honey
- 1/2 **cup** water
- 2 **sprigs** rosemary
- 3 **peeled** orange zest pieces

Put the ingredients in a small saucepan, and simmer for 5 minutes. Remove from heat and let sit 10 minutes, then strain. The syrup will last a couple weeks in the fridge.

CRANBERRY RELISH

- 12 **ounces** fresh cranberries
 - 1 **oranges**, zest and juice
 - 2 **tablespoons** fresh ginger, chopped
 - 1/3 **cup** sugar
 - 1/3 **cup** water
 - Salt and pepper to season
- Heat the sugar, water and ginger in a small saucepan; simmer for 10 minutes. Remove from heat and sit for 15 minutes, then strain. Pulse the cranberries, orange juice and zest, and ginger syrup in a food processor until desired consistency. Season with salt and pepper.

What do turkey labels mean?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is responsible for ensuring the truthfulness and accuracy in labeling meat and poultry products. Knowing the meaning of labels can make purchasing a Thanksgiving turkey a little less confusing.

Basted or Self-Basted:

Bone-in poultry products that are injected or marinated with a solution containing butter or other edible fat, broth, stock or water plus spices, flavor enhancers and other approved substances.

Fresh: Whole poultry and cuts that have never been below 26 degrees Fahrenheit. Fresh poultry should always bear a "keep refrigerated" statement.

Frozen: Temperature of raw, frozen poultry is 0 degrees Fahrenheit or below.

Hen or Tom: The sex designation of "hen" (female) or "tom" (male) turkey is optional on the label. It is an indication of size rather than the tenderness of a turkey.

Natural: Poultry contains no artificial ingredients or added color and is minimally processed.

No hormones: Under federal law, hormones aren't allowed in raising poultry. Therefore, the claim "no hormones added" can't be used on poultry labels unless it is followed by a statement that says, "Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones."

No antibiotics: The terms "no antibiotics added" may be used on labels for poultry if sufficient documentation is provided by the producer to the FSIS demonstrating that the animals were raised without antibiotics. However, all meat and poultry is antibiotic free. Turkeys can't receive antibiotics prior to

harvest. Turkeys are tested at harvest to ensure the poultry is free of residual antibiotics.

Organic: The turkey farm must meet the U.S. Department of Agriculture's certified organic program standards. Organic doesn't mean the turkey is safer or raised more humanely; rather, it means the turkey is raised without antibiotics and has access to the outdoors.

Young: Turkeys of either sex that are less than 8 months of age.

