

NATIVE HARVEST

The Inspirational Cuisine of
DAMON BAEHREL

Damon Baehrel
with
Kenneth M. Morris and Virginia B. Morris





Native Harvest is based entirely on nature, which has been and continues to be my true inspiration. It's exciting to watch Mother Nature reveal herself, season to season, year after year, imagining what you can create with the things she provides. It's all unbelievably stimulating, and sometimes overwhelming. There's so much happening and so many changes, even from day to day, that I want to take in, celebrate, and share with my dining guests.

All the usual suspects—the sun, moon, stars, clouds, soil, water, stones, trees, leaves, foliage, and wildlife—are there in all their glory. And each day I discover and enjoy them as if it was the first time. If you watch closely, you'll be amazed to see and learn that Mother Nature has everything figured out. It's all about how you interpret and respond to what she's revealing and incorporate it into your own life. As you'll discover, you can find many Native Harvest ingredients in your neighborhood, and even in your own back yard!

Native Harvest Epiphany

It occurred to me one day while in my early 20s that everything I needed to create a one-of-a-kind, self-derived cuisine and dining experience already existed on my overgrown, 12-acre woodlot. It was a true epiphany. I couldn't sleep for days, my mind racing with the possibilities. I knew at that moment that if I was really lucky, I'd get to spend my life exploring, discovering, imagining, creating, and ultimately sharing what would become not only my passion and life's work, but my way of life—a life of exploring.



THE ROOTS OF NATIVE HARVEST

I'm constantly asked why I do what I do, where the idea for Native Harvest came from, and how it continues to change. For a long time I really didn't know how to answer. It was like people asking me how I'm able to breathe.

The soul and spirit of Native Harvest is my belief that anything is possible. From the beginning, it seemed natural to incorporate native elements into the preparations, presentations, and culinary techniques I was developing. Some may seem very simple—such as serving a cracker created from pine flour on one of the many majestic stones imprinted with a seashell fossil that I've found on the property. Others are not so simple, like cooking wild roots for hours in soil both to intensify and tame the emerging flavors.

Native Harvest was certainly shaped by my childhood. Being curious and aware of my surroundings, and taking time to explore and imagine what may be possible, has given me such joy all my life, especially when I make a new discovery. I've never spent a lot of time reading—I've always been much better at living and experiencing things for myself.

I've always been unconventional, and I realized early on that I was going to do my own thing and go my own way. The lack of formal culinary training helped me look at things in a unique way—I didn't

have any pre-conceived ideas about what food or food service ought to be. Yet I seem to have had an instinct for things related to food and the workings of a professional kitchen.

Some people seem to be naturally geared to understand and do certain things. In my case, the concept of Native Harvest—the cuisine, the ingredients, the techniques, and the unique combinations and presentations—has been derived intuitively. So has my custom of

interacting directly with my guests.

Being free of the restrictions, expectations, and boundaries that often accompany conventional cuisine has helped me shape and develop Native Harvest. My primary focus has been on using those native and cultivated ingredients that can be found—sometimes with painstaking effort—here on our property. Yet I've never thought of this commitment

as a limitation, but as the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in which I find enjoyment every day of my life.

Being in a quiet, secluded location and taking time to think, to imagine, to explore, to experiment, and to do, rather than learning from and emulating others, is the reason Native Harvest has become what it is.

“When you're trying to achieve a certain culinary result, Nature usually provides the means to get you there.”





A Memory: Winter Bounty

My wife and I have similar childhood memories of harvesting Brussels sprouts during the winter. She remembers her late father making his way through a foot of new snow to gather the last few stalks on New Year's Day to enjoy for the first meal of the year. There's something terribly exciting about shoveling your way through snow to a cold frame in the middle of winter, clearing the snow from the lid, and opening it to reveal a thriving mini-garden of nourishment.

— BREAKING WITH CULINARY GOSPEL —

Although I'm a completely self-taught chef, I did spend a few brief periods working in other establishments a long time ago. In one place, among my first duties each day was to melt pounds of butter. Butter was used in every preparation, every dish, and every side dish. Along with heavy cream, it was the foundation of virtually everything on the menu.

While we were not allowed to taste anything that we served, when a dish came back to the dishwashing area untouched, it was game on if we could sneak a taste. So when an egg-battered-and-floured veal cutlet, cooked in hot butter with heavy cream, along with a few mushrooms and a shot of brandy, was returned to the kitchen untouched, I was ready! That first taste was an eye-opener. My palate was immediately overwhelmed by the flavor of butter and cream. The natural flavors of the main ingredients were muted by the overbearing richness. And although I had a huge appetite back then, I almost instantly felt full and lethargic. I wondered if the diners felt the same way.

I understand that certain amounts of butter and cream emulsified into a sauce can add a richness that many people enjoy. But once my palate is coated with dairy, that's all I can taste. It becomes much more difficult to experience the main components of a dish. The true flavors

of the food seem to me to be overwhelmed, sensed only dimly in the background, secondary and unimportant.

And I know I may ruffle some feathers with this, but I find the same to be true with olive oil. Many chefs and home cooks drizzle, or even pour, olive oil on everything. This is not to dispute the value of the flavor of olive oil or other thicker viscosity oils. But once your palate is coated with oil, it's difficult to taste anything else, especially the subtle nuances in wines.

If I used butter, cream, and olive oil in my Native Harvest tasting menu, where guests sample dozens of different ingredients, dishes, and preparations over a four-to-five-hour dining experience, they would be overwhelmed by these tongue tranquilizers and feel very full way too soon. It's not that I'm completely anti-butter and cream. I just thought there had to be a different, better way to incorporate the experience of these staples into Native Harvest cuisine.

This single epiphany, made so early in my journey, truly excited me. It meant I had to push harder and dig deeper, and explore other ways to create rich satisfying flavor profiles using other ingredients. I was more committed than ever to simply doing my own thing, and even more curious about the use of native plants already thriving on the property to accomplish this goal.





Carrot Slush

When carrots are sweet, think frozen! Sugar-free carrot slush is the perfect way to reset the palate before moving on to more substantial tastes. I use mostly freshly juiced carrots (90 to 95% juice) with the remainder being stevia tea syrup. I freeze the mixture in a bowl placed in an ice bath, whisking constantly until it gets firm. To serve, I let thaw until slushy and scoop a tiny ball onto the center of a spoon. I dust with pickled baby maple leaf powder and an oven-dried moss powder or scallion-top powder. The nuances of wine are more pronounced after this carrot taste.



Frost-Sweetened Carrot Slush

Yield: About 3 cups

2 cups chilled fresh frost-sweetened carrot juice

1 cup chilled stevia tea syrup

Salt (to lower ice bath temperature)

Your choice of seasoning powders

Step 1 Fill large bowl or pot 2/3 full with ice. Mix in some salt to lower temperature and make the ice colder.

Step 2 In a metal or glass bowl, combine carrot juice and stevia tea syrup and gently push bowl into the bowl of ice as deeply as possible, so most of the bowl is in contact with ice. Using a cold clean kitchen whisk, spatula, or fork, begin stirring the liquid while rotating the bowl in the ice.

Step 3 As the mixture begins to thicken, use a rubber scraper along with the whisk to scrape down the sides of the bowl occasionally and incorporate into slush.

TIP The first part to freeze will be the mixture in contact with the bowl. Blending the part of mixture that is not yet frozen with the frozen part will allow the slush to freeze gradually.

Step 4 When the mixture becomes fully slushy, transfer it to a shallow rectangular container with a lid that holds 3 to 4 cups. Level the slush in the container, cover with plastic wrap, add the lid, and place in the freezer.

Step 5 To serve, remove the slush from the freezer and let warm up slightly until it is slushy. Scoop the slush onto spoons using a 1 or 2 ounce scoop or melon baller to determine the serving amount. Dust with seasoning powders, such as rhubarb, wild onion, or lichen powders, to add an extra dash of taste. Serve immediately.

TIP Most freezers have a temperature range of -20 degrees to 0 degrees. A slush should be scooped at 0 to 10 degrees.

