

A Nice Load

Questions for the chef

I've been getting manure for my garden by looking at the "give-away" section of the local classifieds. Got some great "stuff" from a horse farm the other week, and yesterday I came home with a nice load of sheep manure. I gotta say, though, my sheep shit smells really strong, like ammonia cleaner. I'm not sure I want to put it on my garden. — Sheepish About Shit

Dear Sheepish: Your nose does not deceive you! Sheep manure can be very rich, especially if the sheep were fed on a grain diet rather than pasture. The ammonia smell you noticed is, in fact, ammonia.

Ammonia is an important source of nitrogen, which plants require. Although the atmosphere is mostly nitrogen, that nitrogen is in the form of a diatomic molecule — which is kind of like two nitrogen atoms holding hands. The atoms are "holding hands" so tightly, in fact, that they won't let go and

tion, and bravo for pondering it despite resolutely caving in to your abusive desires.

Fresh is nice because it's the least processed and potentially the best tasting and most vitamin rich. But with fresh, you are shipping the whole fruit, including skin and top, which would eventually be discarded. Thus, you're burning oil to ship refrigerated compost. And you're encouraging the exporting nation to export a raw material, rather than the value-added product of canned pineapple (which was more likely to have been harvested when ripe, rather than a week before it was ripe).

Not only are the value-added contents of that can of pineapple edible, they can be shipped on a slow boat with no refrigeration required. But the downside is the energy and raw materials that go into producing that can — although, according to the Pittsburgh-based Steel Recycling Institute, 88 percent of all steel products are recycled, saving energy and ore.

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"hold hands" with molecules in the plants. Thus, atmospheric nitrogen is useless as a fertilizer.

Chemists have created a process by which nitrogen gas is subjected to intense heat and pressure, at a great expense of energy. The result is chemical nitrogen fertilizer whose active ingredient is ammonia — the stuff your sheep shit is full of.

In addition to providing environmentally friendly nitrogen, manure adds all kinds of organic matter as well as other nutrients like phosphorus, potassium and micronutrients, all of which will help build healthy soil.

But patience is required. The rule of thumb for manure is you want it to be two years old and fully composted. If you want to take a more active role in your manure's composting schedule, you can add a carbon source (like straw or sawdust) and turn it and water it often. Then it will be ready to use sooner. If you use manure before it's composted, it can be too "hot" and damage your garden.

I suspect you have some hot shit.

I have a dilemma. I want pineapple, and I'm already sweating the fact the fruit I want needs to be shipped from far away, releasing greenhouse gases into the environment and contributing to global warming. Still, I want my pineapple bad enough to buy it anyway. So here's my question: Should I buy my sinful pineapple from a can, or fresh? — Pining for Pineapple

Dear Pining: That's a really good ques-

tion, and bravo for pondering it despite resolutely caving in to your abusive desires.

I think the best answer is "none of the above," because the most ecologically friendly way to eat pineapple in North America is to eat it dried. That's the lowest weight option, and thus the least energy-intensive shipping option. It's likely to be harvested at the peak of freshness, and not only is it value added, but the drying process can be conducted on a very small scale, which means small farmers can get in on the action.

My German grandmother always had washing machine-sized rhubarb plants, with massive red and green stalks and leaves the size of cookie sheets. Despite adding fish emulsion, horse shit and compost, my rhubarb still remains miniscule. I've even split up the massive root system, and all have sprouted. But all are small. What gives? How can I make Gramma proud? — Really Small Rhubarb

Dear Rhubarb: This is a nature/nurture thing. You've been doing a good job "mothering" your rhubarb. But plants, like people, come in different sizes — and some rhubarb strains are big while others are small. It sounds like you've given your plants every opportunity to actualize, and they have. So now you have to decide if the love you feel for your rhubarb is unconditional or if you want to swap your little runt for a bigger strain so that Gramma will conditionally love you, too.

Chef Boy Ari, also known as Ari LaVaux, is currently living and cooking in Missoula, Mont.

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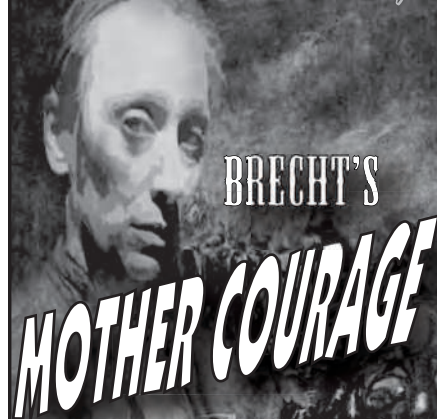
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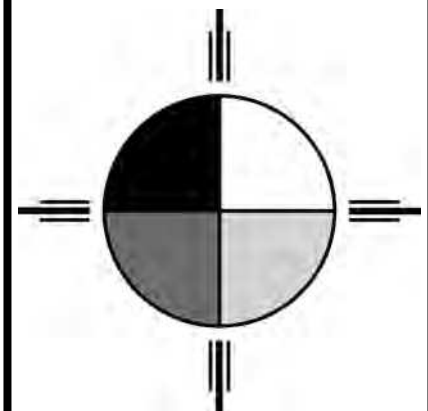
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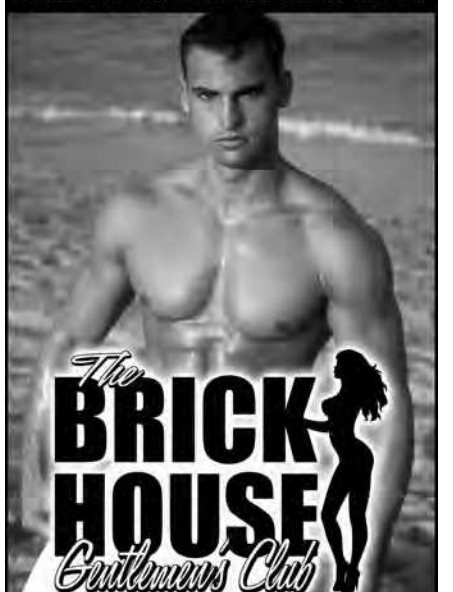
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