

HEARTHFIRE & BRIMSTONE

DINING ON A BEANSTRING



Photos by Damian Mulinix

Before blanching your green beans, be sure to trim the ends. If your string beans are particularly long, feel free to cut them into smaller pieces.

Thanks to Calvin Keeney, there's nothing stuck in your teeth

By NATALIE ST. JOHN
For the *Chinook Observer*

When I was small, we lived in Fort Collins, Colorado. On summer afternoons, towering black clouds would sweep in. The impending downpour dictated a break, so my parents often made popcorn and lemonade. For a half hour or so, the air was charged with that intoxicating summer-storm smell of ozone, wet cement and grass — the time-to-get-out-of-the-pool-smell.

We spent those cloudbursts together on the couch, watching the lightning through the plate-glass living room windows. There was always a downpour, sometimes golf-ball-sized hail. And then the popcorn ran out and the sun broke through, fiercely golden against the black sky. The earthworms came up for air and the world was new again.

Thirty-five years later, I'm still chasing that quintessential summer feeling like one of those manic idiots that drives his Ford Fiesta into the center of a tornado so he can film it for YouTube.

Invoking the spirit of summer

We all have a precise nexus of tastes and smells that instantly invokes the spirit of summer — a seasonal food ritual that says, *We've finally arrived.*

I asked my friends and family and got a range of answers that showed how personal and specific each person's sense of summer is. Eating blackberries or Rainier cherries. Making root beer floats. Grilling and day-drinking. For my friend Jeff, it's drinking water from a garden hose. My cousin Meghan throws watermelons in her pool to bob around until dinnertime, my cousin Jonell makes gazpacho with garden vegetables and my Aunt Jeannie eats "tomatoes. Every way imaginable."

For my friend Conrad in California, the essence of summer eating is "making a sandwich and taking it to the park." My friend Wade in Oregon says it's "a picnic lunch with cold fried chicken and homemade potato salad," and for my friend Peter in Virginia, it's "going into the garden to pick beans for supper."

Of blankets and beans

What's yours? I have about 30, but I'm



While green beans may be the star of the summer salad, good fresh tomatoes, lightly sautéed onions and a lemon Dijon vinaigrette help make the tastes come alive.

a displaced desert rat so many of my ideas about summer cooking are totally unrealistic here in the Land of Eternal Fog. As I write this, my dog and I are snuggled under a blanket and my Beloved is making soup. Nothing about this summer's chilly weather inspires — or requires — the kind of spontaneous, simple eat-'em-over-the-sink tomato sandwiches, pitcher drinks, supper salads, experimental popsicles and whatever-is-ripe freeform tarts I consumed in Augusts of yore.

There is one quintessentially summery dish that still appeals to me, even in the depths of blustery late summer on the Peninsula. I've never come up with a better name than "Summer Salad." It depends entirely on fresh, ripe tomatoes and tender, flavorful green beans. There's no cheating — at any other time of year it tastes like something out of a grocery store deli case, but in the summer it's magic.

And it wouldn't be possible without the long-forgotten efforts of Calvin Keeney: King of the Stringless Bean.

Long-forgotten scourge

We all enjoy telling younger people about hardships we've endured, if only

because there's a singular pleasure to be had in letting them know they couldn't possibly understand what it was like.

Here at the dawn of the 21st century, most of us are so accustomed to getting our food at the grocery store that we really can't wrap our heads around what it was like to endure one of the great scourges of our country's agrarian past: the dread bean-string.

In the wake of the Civil War, young Calvin Keeney, of LeRoy, New York, joined his father in running a produce stand. By the early 1880s, Keeney had determined to vanquish the string that bisected each green bean shell. According to a 1921 edition of the *American Florist* (can you believe this used to be a magazine!), "he conceived the idea that time and patience could be saved and efficiency promoted if the luscious string bean could be induced to grow without the hepen fibers that must be either removed from the pod before the meal, or from the teeth during it." The same year, E.I. Farrington of the Dearborn Independent wrote, "Everybody knows string beans were very properly named. Formerly, it was always necessary to unwind a snarl of strings in dining on this vegetable."

Making grandpas proud

Keeney was determined to become the kind of man that Republican grandpas everywhere could cite when lecturing their entitled grandchildren about the value of hard work. And so, the Florist said, "he girded up his overalls and went to work."

Keeney spent an entire summer crawling on his knees amongst the beans he and his father grew for the purposes of providing seeds to other farmers, looking for pods that had no strings. Whenever he found one, he flagged it.

At the end of that back-breaking season, he had the beginnings of what would eventually change the fortunes of his family and town, and form the backbone of today's Monsanto empire: a collection of seeds from those special snowflake stringless pods.

He planted those, and for several more seasons, continued reaping and sowing seeds that were increasingly more likely to yield the coveted stringless beans. He introduced his first less-stringy variety in 1884, and by 1911, he had introduced 19 new varieties of snap beans, according to the LeRoy Pennysaver.

Bean-counters

Keeney's invention launched his family into a realm of previously unimagined prosperity. They began acquiring farmland, eventually dedicating more than 6,000 acres to peas and beans. Keeney started warehouses in LeRoy and Cheboygan, Michigan, where women worked long shifts as "bean sorters," and brought bags of bean seeds home for children to sort for extra cash. Keeney helped found canning, salt and plow companies in Leroy, and became director of a local bank. He bought cattle farms in New York, cotton fields in Mississippi and a lumber enterprise in Ohio.

In 1923, he incorporated all of his holdings and in 1927, merged with several other seed companies to form a company now known as ASGROW. That ultimately became one of the seed companies owned by the controversial agriculture mega-corporation, Monsanto.

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