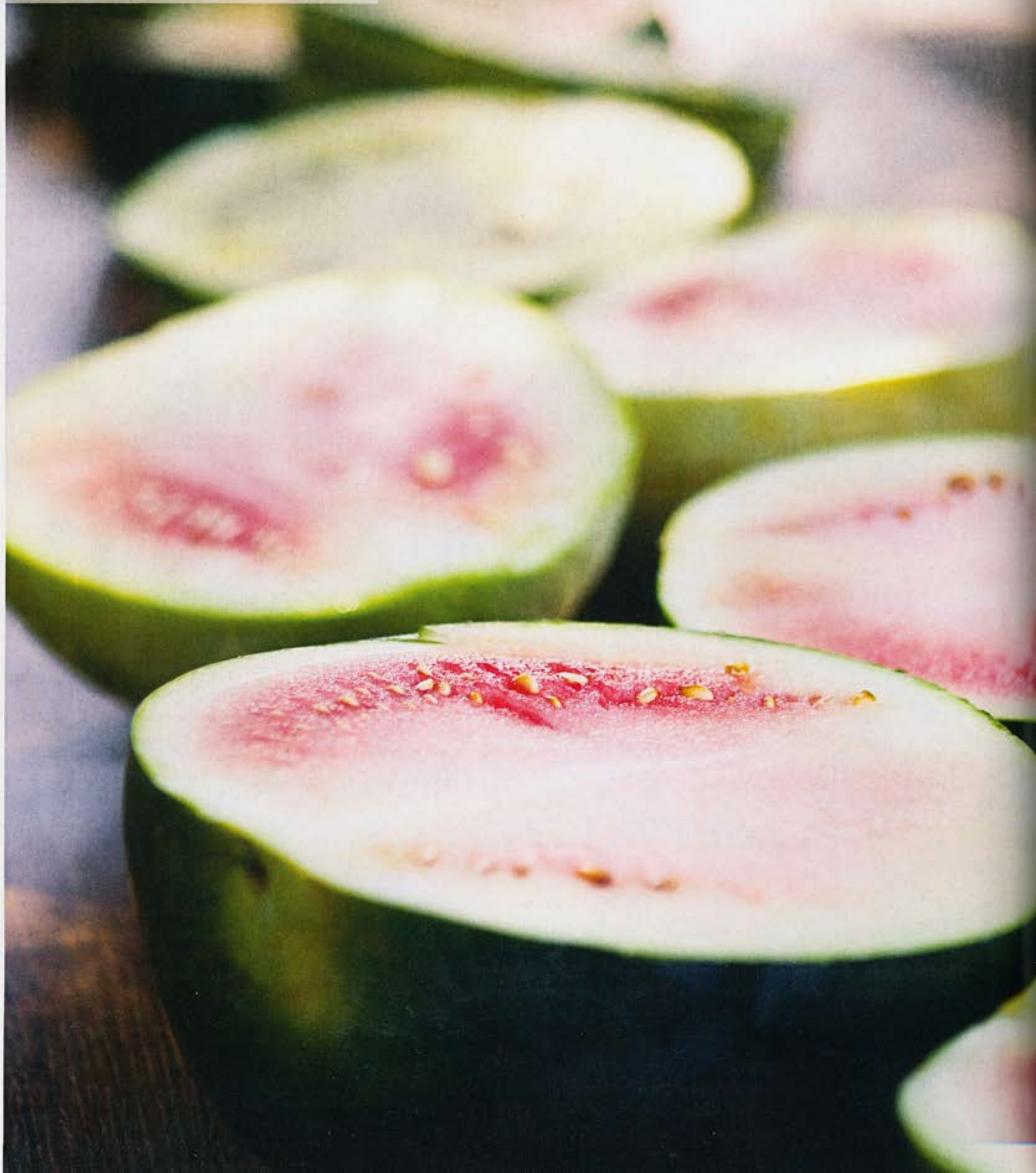
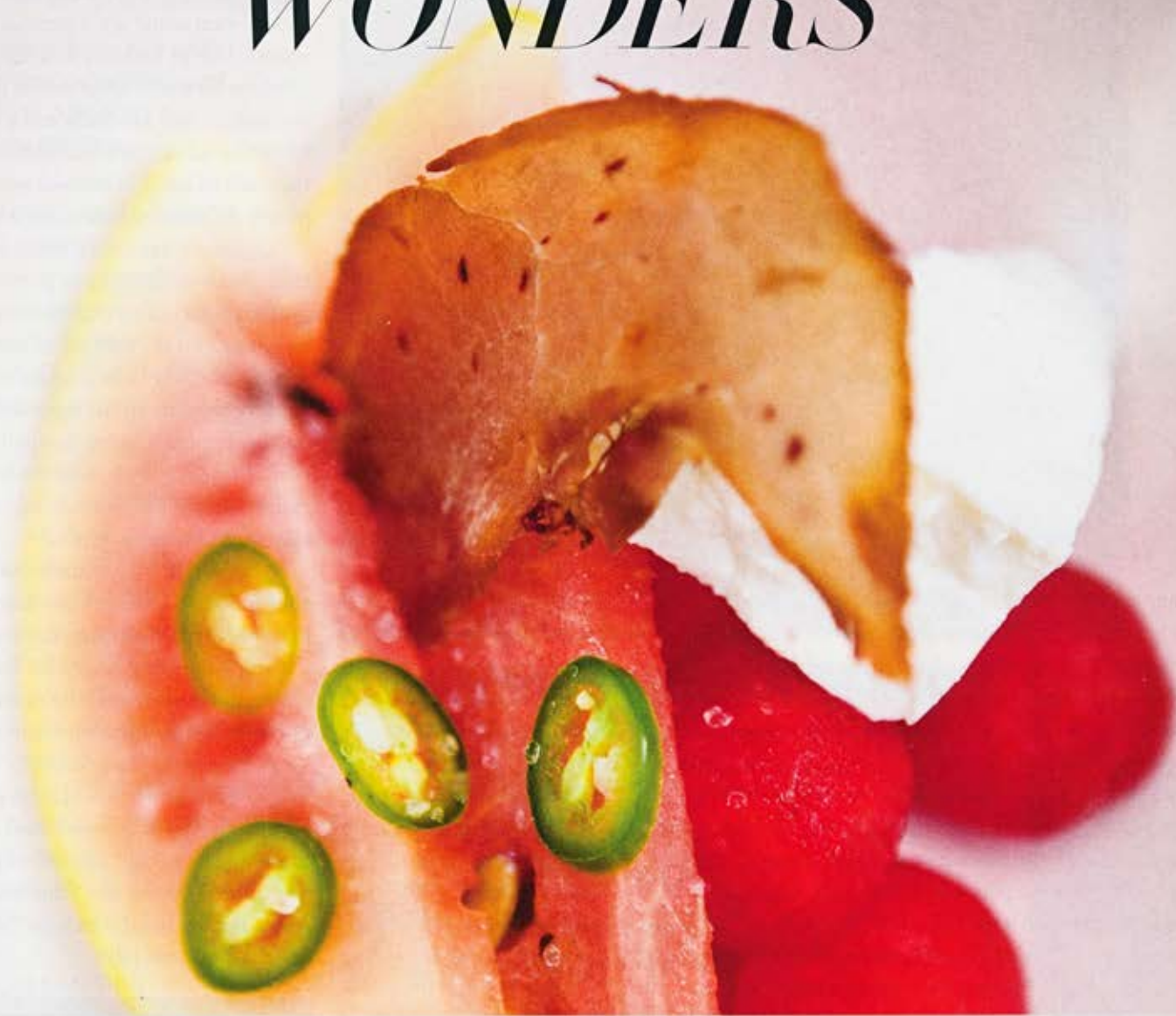


A bumper crop of heirloom watermelon halves line up on an antique farm table at Anne Quatrano and Clifford Harrison's Summerland Farm in Cartersville. *opposite*
The chefs' heirloom watermelon and house-cured country ham in cardamom-infused watermelon water.



WATERMELON WONDERS



FORGET THE SUGARY-SWEET, GROCERY-STORE HYBRIDS YOU'RE USED TO; AT ANNE QUATRANO AND CLIFFORD HARRISON'S CARTERSVILLE FARM, THEY'RE REVIVING NEAR-LOST HEIRLOOM VARIETIES AND GIVING THEM A FRESH NEW CONSIDERATION

WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY ANGIE BENNETT MOSIER | PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRIAN WOODCOCK

Chunks of melon in a cucumber water with mint make up a simple gazpacho. *below* Chef Anne Quatrano gives Petey, a shepherd mix, a sample straight from the garden.



SCATTERED ON THE TABLE ARE WATERMELON SEED PACKETS, stamped with joyful names such as Small Shining Light, Orangeglo, Moon and Stars, Black Diamond and Cream of Saskatchewan. The monikers given these seeds somehow coincide with the dramatic names Chefs Anne Quatrano and Clifford Harrison have given their restaurants—Bacchanalia, Quinones, Floataway Cafe and Abattoir. “I got these from Seed Savers Exchange, a non-profit source out of Iowa dedicated to the preservation of heirloom seeds,” says Quatrano. “Most folks are now used to seeing heirloom tomatoes stocked in markets during the summer, but there are many heirloom watermelon varieties that are endangered. We have all of this land to experiment with, so we decided to seek out the seeds and see what happens. It is so much fun to see how different the plants look, what the flowers and fruits look like as they grow. We are usually surprised to see what they look like on the inside when we cut them open.”

Quatrano and Harrison have been growing fruits and vegetables—and raising animals—on their Cartersville, Georgia, farm since moving onto the family property in 1992. It’s a welcome retreat from their busy city lives, so they gladly drive each day from Summerland Farm to their Atlanta restaurants, bringing with them produce to use in the kitchens. After the work day is done, they return to the farm loaded down with compostable matter from the restaurants as well as used vegetable oil to power their bio-diesel tractors and trucks. These chefs are the real deal—champions of “farm-to-table” cuisine and sustainable living. Quatrano’s eye for detail, coupled with a deep respect for Southern food and tradition, have resulted in some of Atlanta’s finest dining establishments as well as Star Provisions, her exceptional market for all things tasty and tasteful for the table. The active role that these two take in their business affords them the opportunity to play around with merchandising and menu ideas. What’s more, their staff is well versed in stretching their imaginations.

The testing starts right on the farm and—as Quatrano rides through the fields on an all-terrain vehicle with two or three dogs along for the ride—she explains how growing heirloom fruits and vegetables connects the gardener and the diner with forgotten flavors. While the hybridization of plants may help make them more hearty or pest- and disease-resistant, it also

cancel out some flavor profiles that, while subtle, are complex and important. “I believe that hybrid watermelons have been altered to ripen quickly and to have an enormous sugar content,” she says. “Most people have only tasted water-filled, sugary melons. When we tasted the heirloom melons, it was incredible to find that some are so creamy and almost squash-like in flavor. Those ended up being fabulous for use in white melon gazpacho with cucumbers and almonds and in tomato watermelon salads. We also love to pickle, and the rinds of some heirlooms provided a completely different vehicle for the brine.”

Quatrano has a deep respect for the work that goes into farming and cooking but also for the history of an ingredient, proven as she elaborates on the subject of taste. “The reason the melons have a squash-like flavor is because they are in the squash family, and all of those plants were brought over from Africa. It makes sense that the fruits and vegetables do well here since we have a similar climate to Western Africa.”

Indeed, rice, okra, squash and melons traveled to North America on slave ships and—like Americans of African descent—they have a history that should not be forgotten. The telling of the story and the eating of the food pays homage to those who endured the hardships that brought prosperity to America. Like anything else passed from generation to generation, heirloom seeds have a story. Quatrano and Harrison acknowledge the elaborate layers within the fruit and the happy result is some of the richest flavors ever set upon a Southern table.





HEIRLOOM WATERMELON AND HOUSE-CURED COUNTRY HAM IN CARDAMOM-INFUSED WATERMELON WATER

SERVES 4

- 2 cups heirloom watermelon balls, wedges or slices
- 2 cups heirloom watermelon water
- 1 cup crumbled feta
- 8 slices of country ham
- Salt, mint and sliced serrano peppers (optional) to garnish

—To make watermelon water, take the scraps and juice of watermelon from dicing, slicing or balling, and purée in a blender. Pour through cheesecloth in a strainer and let stand in refrigerator for a few hours to drip. Season with salt or a little vinegar to taste.

—To make country ham chips, place ham between two pieces of parchment and between two flat sheet pans. Cook slowly in a low oven at 250 degrees for about 1½ hours or until crisp.

—Store in an air-tight container. To serve, assemble the ingredients in a bowl and garnish.

WATERMELON SANGRIA

SERVES 4

- 1 bottle Pinot grigio
- ½ cup Cointreau
- 1 cup watermelon water
- 3 cups of cubed or balled heirloom watermelon—your choice
- Pinch of salt
- Torn julep mint leaf
- Splash of quinine

—Macerate watermelon in wine with Cointreau and watermelon water. Add torn mint and salt. Serve over ice in chilled glasses with a splash of quinine to finish.



clockwise from top left Because each watermelon has a distinct flavor, Quatrano likes to combine flavors that she can mix and match. Salty pork, tangy feta, hot peppers and cucumber water work with the mildly sweet melons, and her watermelon pickle relish makes a good side to all kinds of main dishes. A variety of heirloom watermelons makes for a striking tableau. Chef Clifford Harrison emphasizes that buying seeds from organizations like Seed Savers Exchange helps perpetuate heirloom varieties. Fresh-cut melons are ready to eat.