



{ from the land }

GOOSEBERRIES

THE COMEBACK FRUIT AT THISTLE WHISTLE FARM

by Annette Gallagher Weisman

Ah, the lowly gooseberry! Behold these hairy wretches that groweth amidst bushes of thorns. Who desireth them? Top chefs, that's who! The constant search for the flavorful and unique makes it likely that this once-banned fruit will soon be "the next big thing" to hit the culinary world.

Some predictions: After years of virtual oblivion, gooseberries will be cool — and hot, served à la mode; their juices will be drizzled around delectable dishes; they will become as "in" as fruits such as pomegranates and kiwis; they will join the ranks of the best-known reductions and will be used as a sauce accompanying fish or pork loin; they will be contained in cute jars dressed in checkered-cloth covered lids and tied with pert bows, then sold as the jammiest of jams or the chutniest of chutneys; or, merely yet supremely, gooseberries will be baked in a pie and served with a dollop of cream.

Locally, where would you expect to find this quirky fruit? On a farm with a quirky name: the Thistle Whistle in Hotchkiss, a pleasant 97-mile drive from Aspen.

First, one has to ask, how did this farm get such a name? Mark Waltermire, who owns and runs this naturally grown/certified organic farm with his wife, Katie Dean, says, "We have different versions of the story. The closest to the truth is that Katie and I were batting potential names back and forth late at night, and Thistle Whistle was the one that made us laugh. We weren't tired of it the next day and stuck with it, thinking that for our small 16-acre farm, conventional business naming needn't apply."

In the 1930s, the gooseberry, in the same genus as the currant family, was thought to cause a tree disease known as white pine blister rust. Growers overreacted, not realizing that the disease was due to some currants and wild gooseberry bushes growing too close to the trees. The U.S. government banned the cultivation of both plants in the 1930s. And, while 33 years later the ban was lifted, gooseberries are still restricted in some states.



But for Waltermire, growing gooseberries is a family tradition. “I’ve had gooseberries in every place I’ve lived and farmed: Montana, Massachusetts and here. I’ve grown up with gooseberries in the backyard in Idaho, and my grandfather grew them commercially on his farm near Loveland, Colorado.”

Thistle Whistle Farm will have its first crop of gooseberries in June, and Waltermire intends to plant more. “They’re relatively easy to grow and not too fussy about conditions. The difficulties with gooseberries stem from their nasty long thorns that get in the way of easy harvesting.”

But as difficult as they may be to harvest, gooseberries are good for you. They contain riboflavinoids, pectin and vitamins A, D and C, among other nutrients, as well as ellagic acid, a natural cancer-fighting substance. The life of a gooseberry bush is more than 30 years. While there are many varieties and colors, there are two primary types: the European and the more disease-resistant, smaller-fruited American. The prime time to harvest gooseberries is midsummer, when the tart green variety has become a sweeter-tasting pink. Waltermire grows three varieties: “rootings” from his grandfather’s farm, the European Hinnonmaki Red and the American Invicta. It’s fun — if one has mild sadistic tendencies — to witness the pinched look of surprise on the face of someone eating a barely ripe gooseberry, which is comparable to a lemon in taste, for the first time. Nonetheless, Waltermire says, “I like my gooseberries raw: slightly underripe, sour and crunchy.”

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Despite its size, there’s much to satisfy almost every culinary desire at Thistle Whistle Farm. For Waltermire, it’s all about flavor over appearance. “I try to grow the best-tasting, most-intriguing, highest-quality produce we can,” he says. On occasion, he even has to explain what some of his fruits and vegetables are, such as scorzonera (black salsify). Spilanthes, which Waltermire has been growing for years and is one of his favorite herbs, was recently mentioned on NPR’s *All Things Considered* as a hot new ingredient with which a few chefs on the East Coast are experimenting. And hot it is! The buds create a tingling, numbing sensation on the tongue and are used sometimes as a panacea for a toothache or to thwart the burning effect of chiles.

Aside from gooseberries, Waltermire grows an Eden of small fruits, including blackberries, raspberries, sea-buckthorn berries, strawberries and antique apples. He has a wide assortment of conventionally grown vegetables, too, as well as Asian and other unusual varieties, not to mention 50 varieties of heirloom tomatoes, 35 varieties of sweet and roasting peppers, and 40 varieties of hot peppers. Other crops on the farm include organic grains, hops, asparagus and culinary and medicinal herbs. “We also have a small herd of milk goats, a handful of laying hens and one loud and lonely guinea fowl,” notes Waltermire.

Like his farm, Waltermire’s resume is varied and unusual. After graduating from Colorado College in 1985, he lived in Pakistan for two years doing agricultural development work. He then moved to Missoula, Montana, where he met his wife. While there, he and

Recipes courtesy of Barbara Martin, co-owner of the Gooseberry Patch restaurant in Penrose, Colo., known for its gooseberry pie

GOOSEBERRY PIE

- 4-5 cups whole gooseberries**
- 1/3 cup all-purpose flour**
- 1/3 cup cornstarch**
- 1 1/2 cups sugar**
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- 2 rolled-out, 10-inch pie-dough rounds; put one in pie tin**

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Mix together gooseberries, flour, cornstarch, sugar and cinnamon. Pour into pie shell, cover with top crust, crimp and bake for about 60 minutes. Oven temperatures vary, but the pie should be browned and the fruit should bubble for about 10 minutes before removal, or it will not be thickened.

GOOSEBERRY CONSERVE

MAKES APPROXIMATELY FOUR PINTS

- 1 large orange**
- 1 1/2 pounds gooseberries**
- 1 1/2 pounds sugar**
- 1/2 pound raisins (dried cranberries are also good)**
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- 2 cups roughly chopped pecans or walnuts**
- 1 teaspoon vanilla**

Wash the orange, cut into chunks and place into a food processor. (If you prefer, zest the orange, discard the remaining peel and use the zest and fruit). Pulse until the orange is small and chunky. Put the processed orange into a heavy-bottomed saucepan and add the gooseberries, sugar, raisins and cinnamon. Cook over medium-low heat for about 60 minutes, or until the berries are soft and the mixture has thickened. Add nuts and vanilla. This conserve can be put up in jars, using a water-bath treatment for canning, or just refrigerated. It is excellent on biscuits and even served with meats.

GOOSEBERRY JAM

MAKES APPROXIMATELY 3 PINTS

- 1 quart gooseberries**
- 1 cup water**
- 3 cups sugar**

Put gooseberries and water into a heavy-bottomed saucepan. Cook over medium-low heat for about 60 minutes, or until skins are tender. Add sugar and cook until mixture is thickened. There is enough natural pectin in this fruit so that you won't need to add any. You can put this mixture up in jars, using a water-bath treatment for canning, or refrigerate.

Note: If you have any rhubarb, cut up into small chunks and add a little more sugar, and you'll have a delicious gooseberry-rhubarb jam.





some friends started the Missoula Urban Demonstration Project, demonstrating and exploring self-reliant living skills, including backyard gardening, community gardening and composting, and alternative energy. After six more years and a masters' degree in environmental studies from the University of Montana, he moved to Massachusetts. Much of his time there was spent running an educational, nonprofit food-bank farm on land once lived on and gardened by Henry David Thoreau. "We grew vegetables and fruits for about a dozen meal programs, shelters and food pantries, tailoring the produce to many ethnic groups the program served, including Haitians, Central Americans and Hmong." The farm recruited a diverse group of volunteers, including some with disabilities. "Mixing these groups in the fields gave the participants an appreciation for the power that food and food production has to bridge backgrounds and cultures," explains Waltermire.

After 10 years in Massachusetts, Mark, with his wife and their two young boys, returned to Colorado. They started their own farm in Hotchkiss, intending to continue his interest in high-quality, flavorful, healthful produce available to and appreciated by all segments of the population. Situated at the edge of the mountains, the mesalike land, in a semi-desert climate, has flat plateaus with good irrigation. "We were attracted to this area because there was an unusually large concentration of small, organic farms with an unusual diversity of fruit and vegetable crops, and animal products," says Waltermire. He adds that farming here is easier in some ways due to its farming community, and the soils, weather and growing season make for excellent quality produce, "the best-tasting I've come across." However, he notes, "The clay is heavy and easily compacted, making it difficult to time many farm activities."

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Waltermire is a passionate farmer/educator who takes on everything he does with a missionary zeal. "I'm still hooked on the mix of education, kids and gardens," he says. And Thistle Whistle Farm grows food for a local food bank with the help of volunteers. Says Waltermire, "Last year we coordinated growing for and organizing the CSA with Raincrow Farm, another local farm; this year we'll be carrying it ourselves." He sells his produce to Aspen markets mostly through wholesalers, including Fresh and Wylde, and fulfills special orders for several Aspen-area restaurants.

The most rewarding thing about farming for Waltermire is the satisfaction he gets from nurturing a plant from seed to harvest and sharing the experience with others. The most disheartening is the fragility of the occupation. "We're at the mercy of the weather, labor markets and unfavorable economics," he says.

So what's next for Waltermire? "I'm trialing the jostaberry, a cross between gooseberries and black currants." Maybe by 2010, the jostaberry will be the new next big thing. 

Annette Gallagher Weisman is a freelance writer and award-winning essayist who has written for many publications, including national magazines. She loves gooseberries and used to pick them as a child near her home in Dublin, Ireland.

Photograph: JT Thomas

Mark Waltermire tending to an injured kid.