

FOOD

FOOD: Breaking the Heat

By Jonathan Reynolds

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In these moist, drag-slag days, when the city's heat makes your rayons cling, it's reassuring to note that it's not only the temperature of the food you eat that has the capacity to cool. What you want on days like these is intake that makes you feel like the frosty inside of a fridge, and aside from ice cream, cold drinks and just plain ice applied to wrist, neck or ankle, very few foods actually lower body heat. But some can create an arctic blast visually, tactilely and gustatorily. Sometimes it's the cool crackle of the perfect gazpacho; sometimes, the perfume of an especially silken Crenshaw melon. Always, it's the sweetness and astringency of heirloom tomatoes. Sometimes the perfect late-summer meal is as far away as Copenhagen or as near as the Upper West Side.

And sometimes you can lower your corporal thermometer simply by right thinking. As your feet put on weight and increasingly stick to 83rd (and every other) Street, you can replicate air-conditioning by picturing, say, the frozen fjords of Norway or the rolling Blue Ridge Mountains of Alleghany County, N.C. It's not that there's less bubbling asphalt in Alleghany County. What cools is knowing that somewhere in Alleghany County, towheaded boys are cycling their hearts out over a hilly stretch of highway flanked by freshly baled hay, hot waves vaporizing up from the road, perspiration flying off them in the bike wind. And they will suddenly screech their brakes and pull off onto the gravel shoulder to partake of a quick, refreshing gulp of buttermilk. Fast grin, mouth wipe and off they pedal again.

Buttermilk? Grin? Yewwww. Surely there are more towheads and grown-ups alike who wouldn't touch a dram of buttermilk in hot, or any other, weather than there are devotees who devour it by the quart.

I'm not one of them. I adore buttermilk and always have, straight from the bottle or in a mound of steaming homemade biscuits or as a marinade for fried chicken, where its light acidity gouges the flesh just right. The combination of creaminess, fatlessness and a mild sourness seems particularly restorative in the depths of August. It has always reminded me of yogurt, though without the heavy texture and certainly without the promotional budget.

Buttermilk is a frequent constituent of menus in Scandinavia, an ideal place to retreat from the sidewalk-shriveling summer days of New York. In Norway and Denmark, the thermometer rarely approaches 80, let alone 90, and when it does, the humidity remains bearable.

Although Norwegians have yet to fully grasp that food is not solely a substance you put in your mouth so you can hike longer, the Danes (or at least the Copenhageners) delight in experimentation. The superb Hotel D'Angleterre fiddles with a roast-beef hash, making it particularly suited to accompany your midnight aquavit. And the Café Ketchup, trendier than the Sound Factory and Go hipped together, does a masterful spin on the Danish classic of buttermilk soup by surrounding cardamom ice cream with it and nearly pillow-smothering it with fat, ripe strawberries. If you've got an extra \$1,200 handy, I urge you to spend a night in D'Angleterre's Karen Blixen Suite -- complete with antelope head -- and try its full menu. (Or save a thou or so, and just try the menu.) Café Ketchup's dessert soup is worth bringing straight back here to protect you against the next couple of weeks.

But you can't survive the end of summer on buttermilk alone. The quintessential chilling meal needs a similarly cooling attention-grabber to begin, and I think I found it here at home at Salt, an open-windowed hideaway of great charm and little space on Macdougall Street. Melissa O'Donnell, the owner and chef, opened Salt a year ago after her first restaurant, Stella, closed in the wake of 9/11. In an industry (whole world, really) ripe with rapper-braggart offspring, her goals and style are refreshingly self-effacing. "There are a lot of good small restaurants in New York, and Salt needs to be clear and focused," she told me. "I don't try and create things that are mind-blowing. I'd rather people come into this as their haven from the world." And indeed they do, as evidenced by a full house on a recent steamy evening. Salt's kickoff of haricots verts -- quickly blanched and then mixed with prosciutto and pine nuts, dressed with balsamic and topped with a disk of Boucheron goat cheese -- is a delectable hot-weather appetizer. "You're really eating something with the haricots verts," she says. "Cheese and prosciutto give it a heartiness. You're not eating nothing! It will stay on the menu probably till the end of September. Unless we have a long summer that goes till December."

But what of the heart of the meal, the anchor for that slide between bean and buttermilk?

Another international dish -- from the barbaric wilds of Central Park West -- does the trick. Evangeline Morphos, one of New York's most ambitious home cooks and certainly our most ecumenical, gives roughly one dinner party every other week with her husband, Alan Brinkley, and excels at feasts for Passover, Christmas, Greek Orthodox Easter and "American Easter-or real Easter," as she calls it. Alan is Episcopal; Evangeline is Greek Orthodox. "We split our time between churches, but probably go to more Episcopalian services, because they're shorter."

Morphos prepares a tomato tart in a puffy dough that makes a substantial -- but light -- center to seasonal repasts. "I try to find anything that celebrates tomatoes in summer," she says. "The best tomatoes are indigenous to your area -- or indigenous to Eli's, which has great tomatoes. Try to use a variety. They taste better and make a wonderful mosaic." Her tomato tart is particularly suited to the crest of summer, cutting the fevered air with salt and acid and reimagining a Mediterranean pizza with lighter dough.

Whew. Just writing about these dishes cools me right off, without benefit of fan, A.C. or a trip to Copenhagen. You, too, can overcome the heat hump by making these dishes -- or by conjuring your own gang of biking towheads gleefully wiping buttermilk off their lips. Or wipe it from your own. But first you have to have the nerve to try it.

Buttermilk Soup With Cardamom Ice Cream

(Adapted from Café Ketchup)

For the ice cream:

2 cups cream

2 cups milk

10 large egg yolks

1 cup, plus 2 tablespoons, sugar

1 tablespoon ground cardamom

For the buttermilk soup:

4 cups buttermilk

1 cup heavy cream

3/4 cup vanilla sugar (or regular sugar and 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract)

1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

Strawberries for serving.

1. Combine the cream and milk in a saucepan and bring to a simmer. Remove from the heat. Whisk together the yolks and sugar until smooth. Very slowly whisk the hot cream into the yolks. Return the mixture to the pan and cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until just thick enough to coat the back of a spoon. Strain into a clean bowl, stir in the cardamom and chill well. When chilled, freeze in an ice cream maker according to the manufacturer's instructions.

2. To make the soup, whisk together the buttermilk, cream, sugar and cinnamon until the sugar is dissolved and chill.

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3. Place approximately 1/2 cup of soup in each serving bowl. Add a scoop or two of ice cream to each, and surround with strawberries.

Yield: 10 servings.

Tomato Tart

(Adapted from

Evangeline Morphos)

Prepared unsweetened pie dough for an 8-inch tart pan or 4-by-13-inch rectangular tart pan

2 1/2 tablespoons olive oil, plus more for drizzling

2 onions, thinly sliced

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 cup goat cheese

1 pound tomatoes (any combination of red, yellow, heirloom, cherry), sliced if large or halved if small

1/2 cup crumbled feta or Stilton cheese

1/4 cup pitted calamata olives (optional)

8 sliced basil leaves.

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Roll out the dough to about 1/4 inch thick and line the tart pan with it, pressing excess dough against the sides to make a thicker edge. Prick bottom and sides with a fork. Line with parchment paper, fill with pie weights or dried beans and bake for 20 minutes. Remove weights and parchment and bake another 7 or 8 minutes, until crust is golden brown. Let cool.

2. Heat the olive oil over medium heat and add the onions. Season with salt and pepper and cook until the onions are lightly browned.
3. Spread the onions over bottom of the crust and dot with goat cheese. Arrange tomatoes on top in a mosaic pattern. Dot with the feta or Stilton and push olives into the top. Sprinkle lightly with salt and pepper and drizzle with olive oil.
4. Preheat broiler. Cover the edge of the crust with foil to protect it from burning and broil until tart is lightly browned and bubbly, 4 to 5 minutes. Let cool to room temperature and garnish with basil.

Yield: 6 servings.

Haricots Verts Salad

(Adapted from Salt Restaurant)

For the dressing:

1 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 shallot, chopped

2 cloves garlic, chopped

1 sprig thyme

1 sprig rosemary

1 sprig flat-leaf parsley

1/3 cup balsamic vinegar

1/4 cup Dijon mustard

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

For the salad:

1 cup balsamic vinegar

1 1/4 pounds haricots verts, stem end trimmed

3 ounces prosciutto, julienned

1/2 cup toasted pine nuts

6 ounces Boucheron cheese or other ripened or aged goat cheese, cut into six slices.

1. Combine oil, shallot, garlic and herbs in a small nonreactive pan and bring to a simmer. Remove from heat and cool. Strain and discard the solids. Set aside.
2. In a food processor, combine the vinegar and mustard. With the motor running, very slowly pour in the oil. Season with salt and pepper and set aside.
3. Place the balsamic vinegar in a small stainless-steel pan. Simmer slowly until very syrupy and reduced to 1/3 cup. Set aside.
4. Parboil the haricots verts in a large pot of salted water until just tender, 2 to 3 minutes. Drain, refresh in ice water and dry. Toss beans with the prosciutto and pine nuts and then add enough dressing to coat the ingredients. Transfer to a platter, top with the cheese and drizzle the reduced vinegar over all.

Yield: 6 servings.

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