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CORNELL CHICKEN

A Central New York classic

BY OLIVIA M. HALL

SUMMER MARKS THE BEGINNING OF GRILLING SEASON, and in Central New York that means chicken BBQs. Savory smoke wafts from roadside grill pits, where members of local volunteer fire departments, church groups and schools spend hours flipping hundreds of chicken halves to raise money for their cause. Chances are, they can thank Bob Baker for the tender, tangy meat and delicious brown crust that keep people pulling over.

Known as the "Edison of the Poultry Industry" for his many fowl-related culinary inventions, the food science professor, who passed away in 2006, concocted the mixture of vinegar, oil, egg, poultry seasoning and salt that has coated innumerable batches of grilled chicken for more than six decades.

Although the recipe became famous as "Cornell Chicken," Baker came up with the idea as a young graduate student at Penn State in the late 1940s. "The way he told the story, the governor was coming to visit and the university wanted to do something special," Baker's son Dale recounts.



Professor Robert Baker, in white apron, circa 1960 in Ithaca.

But credit went to the next university in the academic's career when Cornell Cooperative Extension published his method of basting and cooking chicken in an immensely popular bulletin in 1950. (In fact, to this day the digital version remains one of the top twenty downloaded resources from Cornell's library.)

As an assistant professor in the department of poultry science, Baker was charged with increasing the consumption of poultry, meat and eggs. "Technology and husbandry practices had improved, so there were a lot of poultry and eggs available at the time," says Bob Gravani, a professor in the Cornell department of food science, who knew Baker since the late 1960s, first as a mentor and later a colleague. "But back then, poultry didn't come in a very convenient form. The whole chicken carcasses were often on ice in stores—some of them New York dressed, meaning they still had guts in—and they weren't very attractive. You had to cut the feet off, which was a really arduous task. So the consumption of poultry wasn't as great as it is today."

"My dad was constantly trying to come up with products to promote chicken," says Baker's daughter Reenie Sandsted, who ,like her siblings, constituted his initial taste panel. "Not everything was a winner, and when he later started working with fish, some things were really awful. Out of his six children, three of us became vegetarians."

Nevertheless, like some of her father's other, tastier inventions—among them chicken nuggets, poultry baloney and chicken hot dogs—the new sauce helped to make chicken more user-friendly. What made it so successful?

> "It was a lot of hard, hot work back there," Dale Baker remembers. "But Cornell Chicken actually paid my way through college. And I still enjoy chicken and always keep a can of BBQ sauce in the refrigerator."

First, the mixture comes together very quickly from such pantry staples as vinegar, oil and eggs, forming an emulsion for the salt and poultry seasoning. "Putting in plenty of eggs was very important from my father's perspective, because it made the sauce creamier and stayed attached to the chicken better," Dale Baker explains. Also, unlike other, tomato-based BBQ sauces, the coating gives the meat a nice brown color and doesn't burn too quickly, and, as Gravani points out, its flavor complements the chicken very nicely.

Photographs: opposite, Robyn Wisinna; this page, courtesy of Baker family archives



Professor Baker, in the white lab coat, instructing students on techniques for splitting chicken.

Most pages of the bulletin, however, are dedicated to the best methods for grilling up tender, smoky meat. "The first few times they cooked the chickens, they did it the same way as with a pig roast," Dale Baker recalls. "They dug a hole, put charcoal in there, and actually got down on their knees turning chicken. Then they figured out it would be a whole lot easier if they brought it up above the ground, so they developed racks where you could turn 25 chickens at a time. The whole thing kind of grew from there."

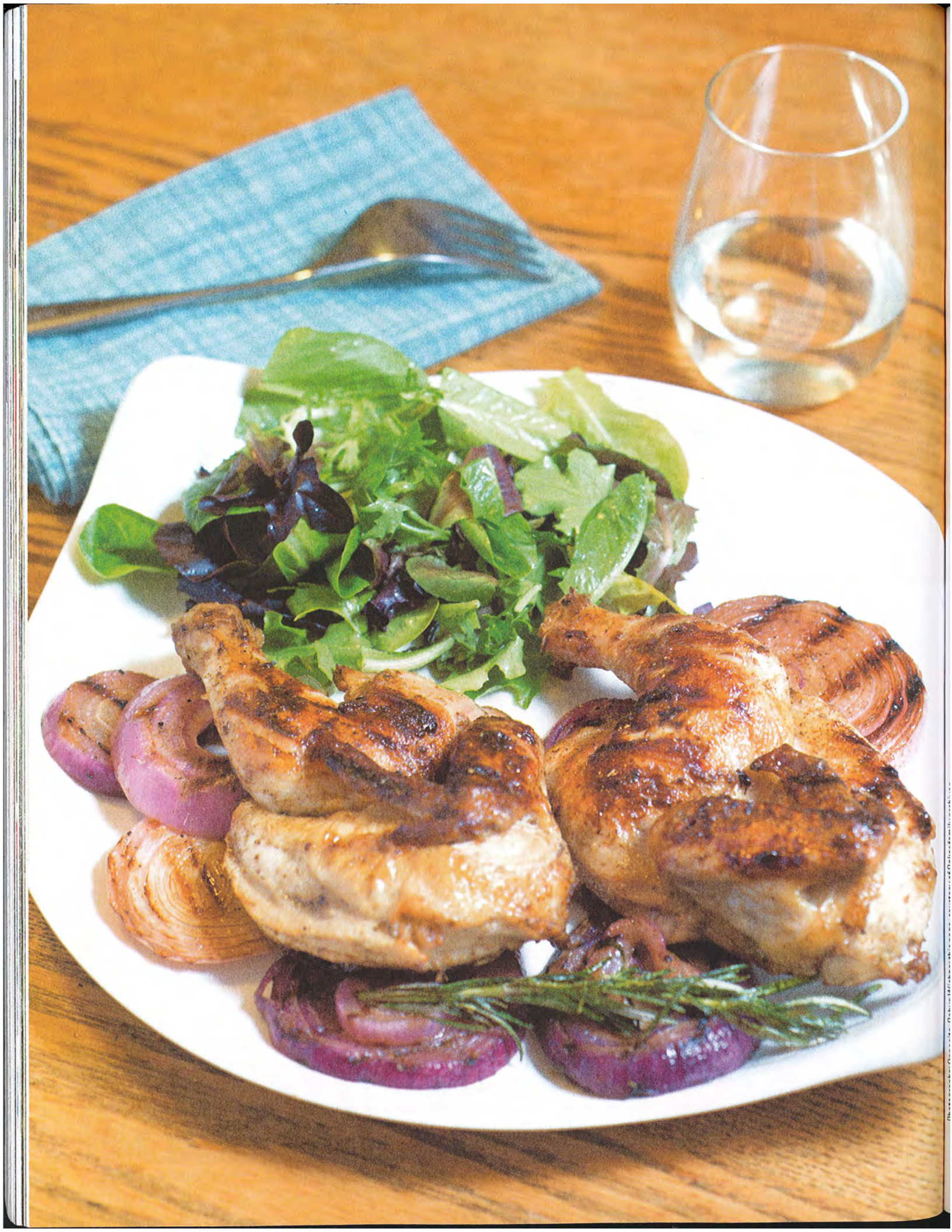
To see how it's done, you can visit the Great New York State Fair in Syracuse, where the Baker family's Chicken Coop has been an institution for some 65 years. Started by Bob Baker and his wife Jackie and now run by Reenie Sandsted and her three sisters, the BBQ stand has seen regular visits by governors, Cornell presidents and, in 1999, Hillary and Bill Clinton and their daughter Chelsea. It has sold as many as 3000 chicken halves a day, though today the numbers are about half of that, as more people graze their way across the fair's many food stands and are just as likely to try the family's chicken wings, nuggets and Buffalo chicken sandwiches.

"It was very much part of our lives growing up," says Sandsted, who also took over the other family business, Bakers Acres in Lansing. All children became partners in the Chicken Coop when they were born and started working there as soon as they were old enough, mixing up their dad's sauce in 10-gallon stainless steel milk cans and basting and turning over chickens on long summer days.

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His father would probably be pleased. Known as a caring person and gracious host who frequently invited graduate students, colleagues and other friends over for—of course—BBQs, Bob Baker himself was still cooking chicken into his early eighties. "This sauce is the invention he enjoyed the most, even to his latest years," Dale Baker says. "I think he was as proud of this as he was of anything he ever did."

Olivia M. Hall is a freelance writer and anthropologist whose food research and travels have taken her around the world. Her food writing has appeared in such publications as the Vegetarian Times and the German magazine TagNacht.



CORNELL CHICKEN

The tried and true recipe

Poultry seasoning

Cider vinegar

Salt

heavy-duty kitchen scissors

1

Beat 1 large egg well in a medium-size bowl. Whisk in 1 cup of olive or vegetable oil, 2 cups of cider vinegar, 3 tablespoons of salt, 1 tablespoon of poultry seasoning and 1 teaspoon of fresh ground black pepper. Stir until everything is well emulsified. Set aside about a cup of the sauce to use for basting chicken on the grill.



2

Using heavy-duty kitchen scissors, cut out the backbone of a medium sized chicken and reserve it in the freezer for homemade stock. Then cut directly down the middle of the breastbone to split the chicken in half. Wash and pat the chicken dry. Using either a Ziploc bag or a metal bowl, pour the marinade over the chicken and toss the mix to coat the chicken well. Cover the bowl if using and refrigerate the chicken for 24 hours.

3

Remove the chicken from the refrigerator about 20 minutes before you are ready to cook it. Lay the chicken halves flat over a medium charcoal or gas fire, turning every 10 minutes for about an hour, basting frequently with the remaining marinade.

Photograph: Robyn Wishna

COOKING CORNELL CHICKEN

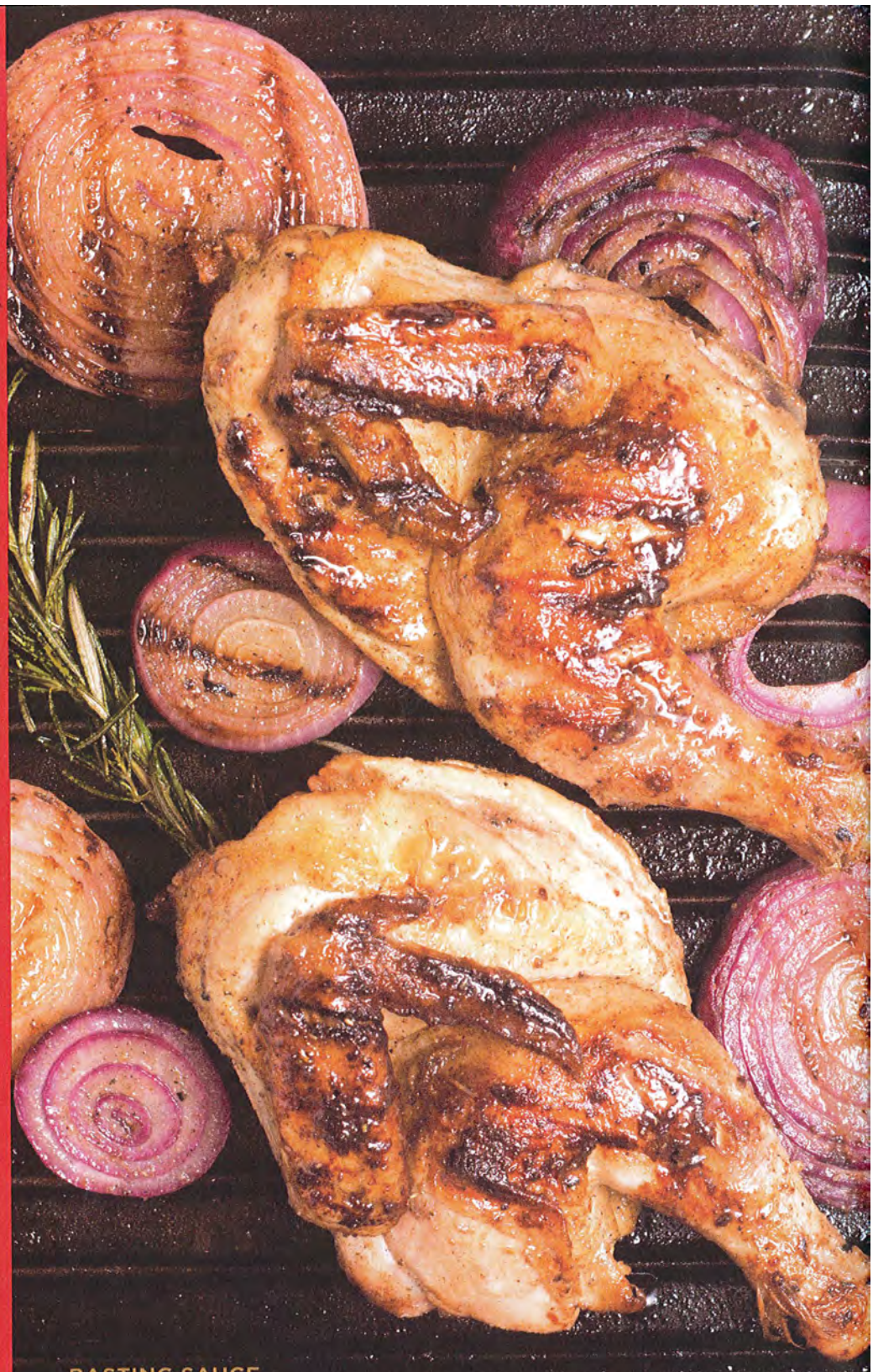
Tips from the Pros

Place the broiler halves—about one pound is a good weight—over a hot, non-flaming fire. Flip and baste the chicken frequently, about every 5 to 10 minutes for an hour or until the internal temperature reaches 165°. "If you cook it in less than an hour, you risk burning the chicken or having it be less flavorful," says Dale Baker. "So turn and sauce it often."

The most important time to baste is towards the end. "At the beginning, it doesn't have a lot of impact on the flavor, it just keeps the meat from burning," Baker says. "But at the end is when the chicken really takes up the sauce."

Simple is the way to go. While you can add herbs and spices or marinate the meat in advance, it does not make too much of a difference in the flavor, according to Baker.

Try the BBQ sauce on other types of meat, especially pork. Reenie Sandsted also recommends brushing it sparingly onto vegetables as you grill them.



BASTING SAUCE

Barbecued broilers without sauce are like bread without butter. The barbecue sauce is a basting material. Brush it on the broiler halves every few minutes during cooking.

Enough for 10 halves

1 egg
1 cup cooking oil
1 pint cider vinegar
3 tablespoons salt*
1 tablespoon poultry seasoning
1/2 teaspoon pepper

Beat the egg; then add the oil and beat again. Add other ingredients and stir. The recipe can be varied to suit individual tastes.

Leftover sauce can be stored in a glass jar in a refrigerator for several weeks.

*Adjust the quantity or eliminate salt to meet individual health needs and taste. Barbecued chicken basted frequently during cooking will be saltier than chicken that has been lightly basted.

Here at Edible Finger Lakes we're big fans of fresh herbs over the dried, ground kind. But the poultry seasoning is a key component to Cornell Chicken and you don't want to take chances by messing around with it. However, since all our fantastic farmers are selling herbs at the markets during summer, we thought why not make our own poultry seasoning to bring a local and fresh twist on Cornell Chicken? We think even the purists out there will like this substitute over the dried and jarred kind.

POULTRY SEASONING

Makes about ¾ cup

This recipe asks you to spend a lot of time with your knife. If you don't want to do all that chopping, you can use a food processor or a blender to chop up the herbs for you. Just don't overblend them or you will end up with pesto.

4 tablespoons thyme, finely chopped
4 tablespoons rosemary, finely chopped
3 tablespoons sage, finely chopped
2 tablespoons marjoram, finely chopped
1 teaspoon nutmeg, freshly grated
1 teaspoon lemon zest, finely grated (optional)

Stir together all ingredients in a bowl. Seasoning will keep, refrigerated, for about 3 days.



Photograph: Robyn Wishna