



It's a family affair

The clan behind Grand Central Baking gathers on their 38-year-old farm for a weekend of cooking, eating and cider-pressing

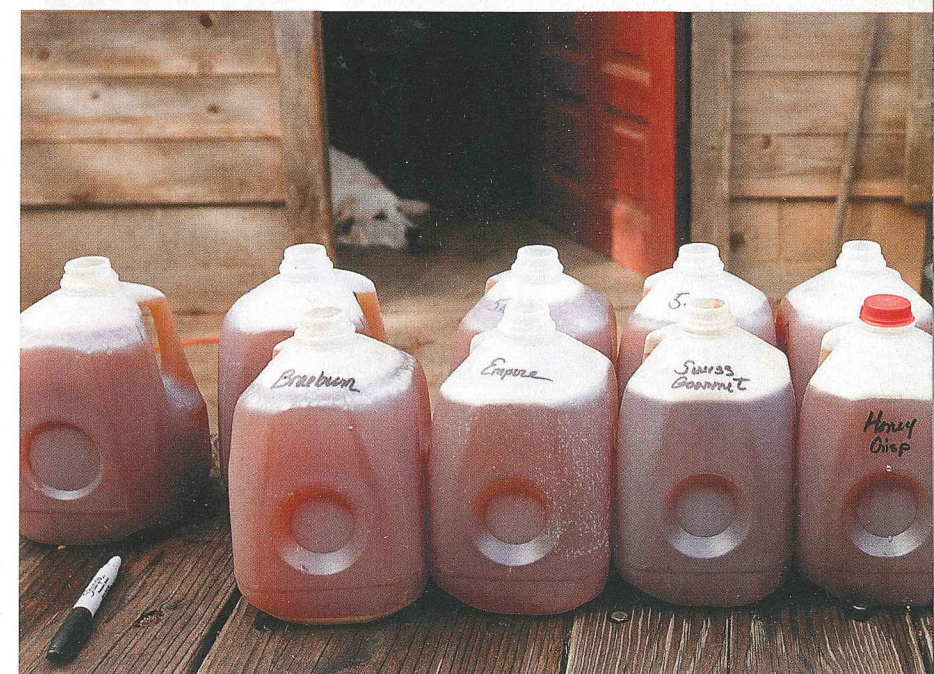
By JEN STEVENSON / Photography by JOHN VALLS

ON THIS COOL, clear October morning, navigating U.S. 84 as the lush forest thickets that cushion the gorge dwindle into The Dalles' harsh golden buzzcut of dry, rock-strewn grass, it's difficult to imagine a flourishing farm springing up amid the desolate landscape.

I'm headed to the tiny town of Goldendale, Wash., to visit the Grand Central Baking Company clan's family homestead on the weekend of their annual cider pressing. But bumping down the two-hour drive's desolate homestretch, with no apple trees (or any trees for that matter) in sight, I'm starting to have my doubts.

Then, suddenly, the road dips deeply into a tiny, oak-choked valley, revealing two weathered, crooked fence posts framing a narrow gravel road. I creep up the winding driveway, past a rustic guesthouse, a horse pasture, a barn and then, just beyond the chicken coop, I see it — the verdant swell of an apple orchard. And just beyond that, a low-slung farmhouse snugged into the hill, the path to the front door lined with pumpkins and warmed by a fire pit emitting fragrant tendrils of smoke into the crisp fall air.

Sitting around the fire is a fleece-wrapped group that includes some of the Pacific Northwest's most esteemed cognoscenti of crust and crumb — matriarch Gwen Bassetti, 76, founder of the original Grand Central Bakery in Seattle, and three of her children: Piper Davis, 48, co-owner and culinary director of all 10 of Grand Central Baking Company's Oregon and Washington bakeries; Megan Davis, 53, owner of Hood River's Pine Street Bakery; and Sam Davis, 45, an architectural cast concrete craftsman and farmer in nearby Underwood, Washington. The only one missing is Gwen's eldest son and company president, Ben Davis, 49, who is on dad duty at an event with his kids.





Immediately upon arrival, both the car and me are subject to a thorough sniff-over by four of the family's five dogs. The Grand Central Bakery folk are, it turns out, dog people. They are also horse people, apple people, salmon people and naturally, baking people, and I'm about to get an initiation into one of their intimate family weekends on their 38-year-old farm.

It's not yet midafternoon, but the apples for tomorrow's cider pressing have already been picked and the kitchen dinner preparations are in full swing. Taking her place at the wide wood slab-topped kitchen island, wrapped in a well-worn apron, Gwen smoothly stuffs rounded spoonfuls of brown sugar and walnuts into the rosy depths of a dozen freshly picked and cored farm apples, to be slow-baked for the evening's dessert.

Hovering nearby, Sam's kids, Gwenth, 11, and Reed, 14, keep an eye on the dessert proceedings. Gwen puts the apples in the oven, then she and her grandkids head off to the stables to take the ponies for their afternoon ride.

Gwen set the foundation for her family's Grand Central Baking Company mini-empire in 1972 when she opened The Bakery in downtown Seattle, a simple cafe serving sandwiches, from-scratch pastries and espresso made with beans from a small operation up the street called Starbucks. She fell in love with what would become her family's own private valley in 1974, when she happened upon it while driving through the Washington wilds on a road trip.

The family built the barn from the ground up, then left the comfort of the Seattle suburbs and moved into it while they built their home. They rode horses, raised 4-H lambs and played on the sports teams for Goldendale, which was buoyed at the time by a large aluminum reduction plant and had a thriving downtown — until Walmart moved into The Dalles.

"I never really thought of it as remote," says Piper. "We loved growing up here. It informed who we all are." Nowadays, with the family scattered across the Pacific Northwest, the long-loved farm is the hub for family gatherings — holidays, long summer weekends, cozy winter getaways.

Taking Gwen's place at the kitchen island, Piper deftly chops slender sticks of crisp celery and Italian parsley, adds capers, then coarsely grates lemon zest into an herb relish that will go on top of the salmon Sam and Reed caught on the White Salmon River near their home.

Sam, who eschewed flour for fish and fields, working first as a commercial fisherman and now as a craftsman while raising pigs and garlic on the side, tromps into the kitchen, rummages around in a crumpled paper bag, and pulls out four heads of garlic the size of baseballs. He quickly slices off the tops, then places them in a small cast iron skillet



to roast over the fire. Next to him, his sister Megan peels the soft, blistered skin from a just-roasted butternut squash.

Piper heads outside with an armful of red and yellow peppers, where, assisted by her longtime partner David Rubovits (who is doing an excellent job of stoking the coals while holding a microbrew), she roasts them over the fire, then pops them into a brown bag.

The screen door squeaks open and the smell of warm apples and brown sugar wafts outside, followed by spunky Nita Pettigrew, a retired high school English teacher and longtime family friend who has been joining the family on farm trips for decades.

"Has anyone looked at the apples lately?" she queries.

"I'm not in charge of the apples, you're in charge of the apples," someone calls back.

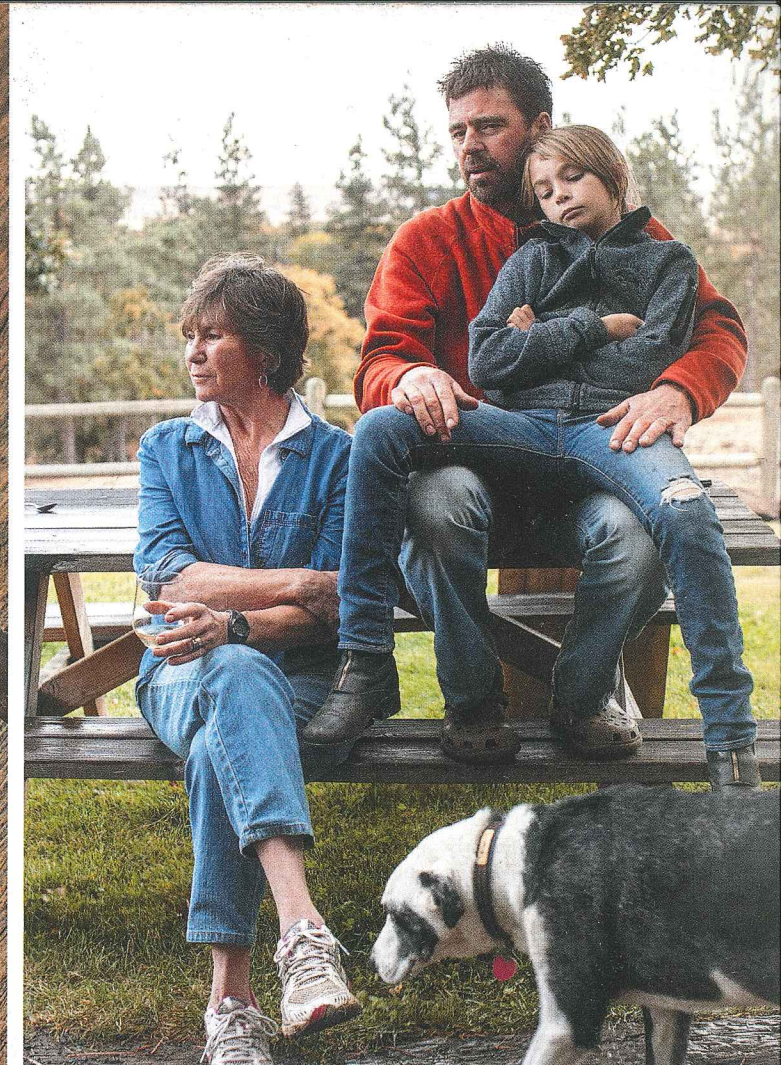
"Well, I was in charge of the squash, too, and somebody took that over!" she retorts saucily, then heads back into the kitchen.

The sky, which has been gathering dark ominous clouds over the farm, begins to dump rain. In unison, everyone moves their chairs back a few inches under the eaves and continues cooking and conversing without interruption, as fat raindrops spatter and crackle on the hot grill. Gwen and the kids walk up the hill shortly thereafter, having gotten their horseback ride in just before the rain.

"How are my apples?" is Gwen's first question.

The kids are put to work peeling roasted peppers and gently separating the florets from fresh heads of cauliflower and romanesco for a cast iron brassicas medley. Gwen's 96-year-old husband Fred Bassetti, a highly renowned retired Seattle architect, strolls into the kitchen, followed closely by a cream- and butter-colored corgi, who sniffs the air with interest.

"This is the busiest kitchen I ever saw," Fred proclaims, then



turns to the corgi. "Let's go for a walk, eh Luc?" The two retreat as quickly as they come.

Soon, it's time to put the fish on the grill. Proudly, Reed hovers over the larger of the two salmon, which his father quickly slices into inch-thick steaks that are then inverted, skin in.

"That's mine," Reed points. "We went fishing after school, then we took them home and gutted them. They just took the dam out, so there's more spawning habitat."

They head outside, where the rain is still falling steadily, but the group around the fire hardly seems to notice.

Piper stands next to the grill in flip-flops and an apron, a glass of white Bordeaux in one hand, tongs in the other, gently turning the brassicas as they char in a skillet set over the open flame.

As Piper watches over dinner, David throws a stick to Madeleine, an enormously appreciative black-and-white mutt, and soon all five of the family's wet dogs are running around the front lawn, the picture of smelly, furry ecstasy. He then retrieves a bottle of Eyrie Pinot Blanc from the kitchen and fills the wine drinkers' glasses, as Megan demonstrates her ability to open a beer with a spoon. Everyone cheers.

"Clint says one of the reasons he married me is because I can open a beer with a toothbrush," Megan confides.

"Dad can open one with a quarter," Reed pipes up. Sam looks up from the grill and nods solemnly.

Conversation veers in diverse directions — food and fishing policy, rubber mats versus rugs in a bakery kitchen, how to best serve the fish.

"Mom wants to put it on this board with some grape leaves," Piper says, brandishing a cutting board.

The siblings all look at each other, a telepathic surrender

passing between them.

"Then we are putting it on that board with some grape leaves," Sam says with finality.

Both ends of the table are weighed down with bread baskets spilling over with the fruits of the two sisters' bakeries — dark, crusty Grand Central Bakery peasant loaves and lean, pale-gold Pine Street Bakery baguettes, which everyone spreads with the roasted garlic from Sam's farm.

Dinner conversation is lively — at one end of the table, the siblings discuss and debate the politics surrounding Bristol Bay salmon fishing, while at the other end, Fred explains his day's project — crafting an elaborate architectural model. He shows me his intricate design, and I examine it closely, pretending I have an inkling of what he's talking about.

Eventually, dessert looms and the baked apples move front and center. Talk comes round to the family's crown jewels.

"We didn't know what kind of apples they were when we first got them, so we called them Bassetts," Fred explains. "But they're actually Spokane Beauties. They're delicious, and they've won best apple twice at the Spokane Fruit Fair, but they're commercially untenable because they're so big and bumpy."

Big and bumpy notwithstanding, they are the ideal apples for baking. Gwen pours a thick stream of heavy cream over the top of each apple, followed by a sweet-tart cider reduction, which

cascades over each piece of fruit, forming a dark bronze pool at the bottom of the bowls. For quite a while after they're served, all you can hear is the clink of spoons.

The next morning blooms clear and radiant, the pale blue sky painted with thin white clouds. Generous streaks of autumn sunlight stream through the forested backyard, setting the crimson trees ablaze with color.

It's barely 7 a.m., but down in the kitchen, Gwen has already donned her now-familiar apron, brewed a pot of Nossa Familia coffee, and lit the big black woodstove. She passes around slabs of moist apple coffeecake, then sets several cast iron skillets — one nearly the size of a car tire — on top of the wood stove and tears open a package of Niman Ranch bacon.

Fred walks in with Luc close on his heels and leans over the pan, admiring the neat rows of frying meat. "Whose pig is that?" he asks, as easily as you'd inquire about the weather or how someone slept.

"It's not our pig," Gwen says. "It's somebody else's pig."

She deftly chops an onion and adds it to another pan, gently tossing it with small red-skinned potatoes. Megan turns on the oven and surveys the empty apple cake plate.

The extended Basetti-Davis family and friends, after a long day pressing fresh apple cider. From left: David Rubovits, Nita Pettigrew, Fred Bassetti, Gwen Bassetti, Sam Davis, Gwyenth Davis, Reed Davis, Piper Davis and Megan Davis.



"That didn't last long," she says. Quickly, easily, she measures butter and flour into a bowl, then grates Tillamook sharp cheddar and chops fresh garden herbs for what will become savory breakfast biscuits, the same ones she serves every morning in her Hood River bakery.

Her flour, she explains, is sourced from a fourth-generation wheat farmer, Anne Kelly of Kelly Ranch, who mills it at the old Sunshine Mill in The Dalles. The reusable flour *bag* is sourced from a Hood River eighth-grader named Owen, who sews them out of the canvas scraps created when holes are cut in a wind surfing sail in order to add Mylar.

I get the distinct feeling that everything the Basetti-Davis family cooks and eats has a story, but far from being the sort of insufferable minutiae that fuels Portlandia skits, it's endearing, comforting and more than a little inspiring.

Slowly, the warm, sunlit kitchen fills with sleepy faces drawn by the intoxicating smells of coffee, bacon and rising biscuits. Gwen slices two large logs of sausage into rounds and sets them in the skillet. Dozens of eggs materialize, courtesy of Megan's own hens, and those, too, go into the pan in what's obviously a well-rehearsed choreography of cooking for an entire herd of family and friends.

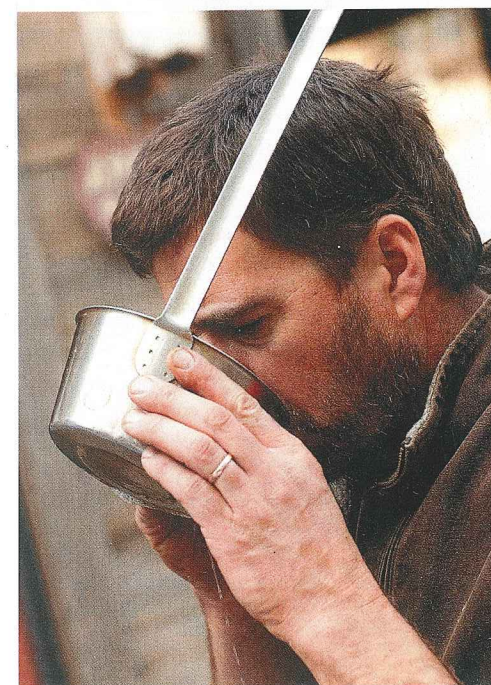
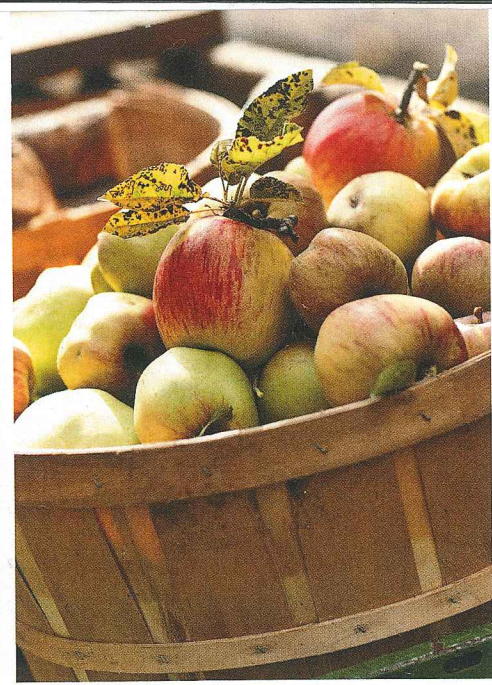
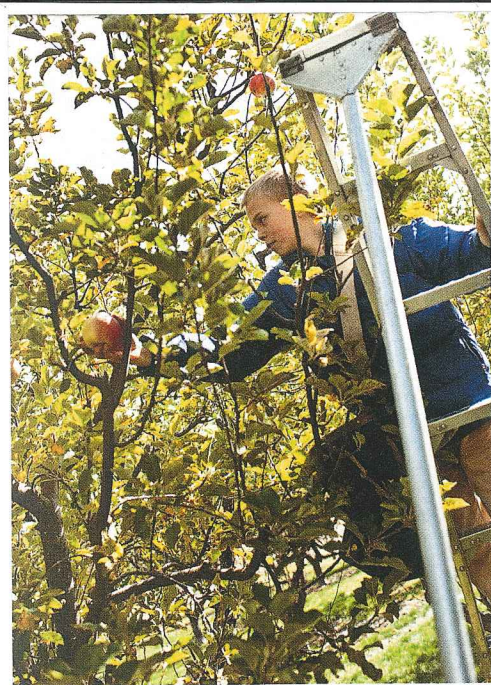
The kitchen goes from 0 to 60 in a matter of minutes. The coffee supply is quickly depleted, so another batch of beans is ground and a fresh pot is put on. There is talk of future bike and horse riding, accusations of exactly whose dog was doing all the 3 a.m. barking last night, passionate narratives of Words With Friends triumphs and cheating. Fred walks briskly through the dining room, passing out printed and stapled copies of the day's New York Times editorials for everyone to read at breakfast.

Noticing my double take, Nita leans in. "He does that every morning," she explains cheerfully, sipping a mug of coffee and skimming her packet.

Fortified by the hearty pioneer breakfast, the family finally gets down to the business of making cider. With dogs both leading and trailing, they troop en masse down to the picturesque apple orchard and its neat rows of 75 trees, most of which bear Spokane Beauties, or Bassetts, depending on your perspective. Apple crops can be fickle, and it hasn't been the best of years, so Megan has imported a "tote" of apples from a Hood River farmer friend to supplement the bushel of homegrown fruit the family picked the day before.

Despite its benign name, a tote bin actually measures out to one metric ton — 250 pounds each of Honeycrisp, Empire, Swiss Gourmet and Braeburn varieties. In all, they'll press more than 1,000 pounds of apples by the day's end. Sam, looking every inch the strapping farmer right out of a Nora Roberts novel, rolls across the orchard in a big tractor fitted with a forklift and lifts the tote from Megan's pickup onto the cider pressing pad. The rest of the family drags a Correll cider press out of the garage and brushes





the dust off of it, readying it for its annual duties.

It's decided that apples will first be pressed by variety, so that each can be tasted solo before Gwen mixes her proprietary custom cider blends. A dozen or so Honeycrisps are tossed into the hopper and David presses them down with an ax handle. Slowly, a promising trickle of murky, sweet-smelling fresh cider begins to stream down the chute and into a scuffed metal pail. When the first bucket is full, Gwen pulls it out and dips a battered tin ladle into the cider.

"Here you go," she says, handing it to Nita. "The loving cup."

The loving cup is passed around, and the Honeycrisp nectar is widely praised. "So bright," Sam says. "Almost like Tree Top." Everyone hoots.

As they've done together every fall for 16 years, ever since the orchard began to produce fruit, the entire family falls into a familiar cider-pressing rhythm. Megan and the kids pull apples from the bin and halve them, David feeds the press, Gwen spoons the fresh cider into a funnel to fill the 50 or so waiting jugs, and Sam spins the big wooden press to squeeze every last bit of juice from the chopped apples.

When the Honeycrisps are gone, the Swiss Gourmets are pitched into the hopper next. As is the custom, the first ensuing bucket of juice is carefully sampled, and tasting notes shared.

"It's very appley," says Piper. "I mean, it's a very *apple forward* cider." Everyone cracks up as the ladle continues to make the rounds.

Empires are pressed, then the Braeburns, and finally, the Bassetts are up to bat.

"We *have* to prove that the Bassetts are superior," Gwen tells the group earnestly.

"These have some dirt on them," someone says critically.

"My doctor told my mother we had to eat a pound of dirt when I was little," Nita declares. "And she saw to it that we did."

"How did you take your dirt?" Sam asks.

"In the backyard, with pecans," Nita replies.

The repartee continues to fly as the brimming Bassetti cider bucket is produced and everyone gathers around thirstily, tasting with a quiet reverence. The verdict hangs in the air.

"Now that," Gwen announces authoritatively, "is real cider."

"Have we proven the Bassetts superiority?" Piper asks dryly.

"Yes," returns a chorus. It's settled.



Butterflied Salmon Steaks With Savory Relish

MAKES 8 SERVINGS

"My brother Sam is a fish man. He can be trusted to both catch and cook dinner — and he makes it look easy," says Piper Davis. "On cider-pressing weekend, Sam showed up with fish he caught in the White Salmon River near his house. For those of us who don't catch our own dinner, buy 8 salmon steaks or two whole sides of a small salmon that has been filleted. As for the relish, it's a fresh herb sauce that goes with everything — and changes depending on what I have around. I might add any number of other ingredients from fresh oregano to olives."

Relish:

- 1 cup chopped fresh Italian parsley
- ½ cup diced celery
- 1 to 2 cloves of garlic, smashed
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 tablespoons capers, drained, or diced dill pickle
- 1 tablespoon lemon zest
- ¼ cup fresh lemon juice
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Salmon:

- 2 (12- to 14-inch) sides of salmon, about 2 pounds each
- Olive oil
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

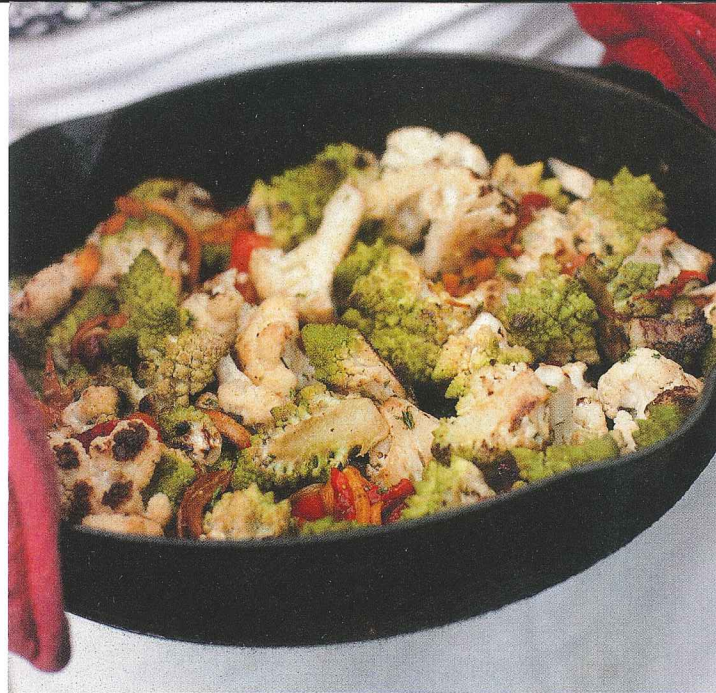
To make the relish: In a small bowl, combine parsley, celery and garlic. Stir in olive oil, capers, lemon zest and juice. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

To make the salmon: Place the salmon skin-side down on a cutting surface. Use a sharp knife to slice portions that are 3 to 4 inches wide. Slice each portion in half lengthwise through the flesh but stop at the skin. Create a "butterfly" by folding the portion back on itself, making the skin sides face each other.

Heat grill to medium heat (you should be able to hold your hand over the flame for about 5 seconds). Brush each butterfly lightly with olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Grill approximately 4 minutes per side. The fish is done when a small amount of the white albumin begins to appear on the surface. The interior should be opaque with a slightly rosy center.

Serve topped with savory relish.

— From Piper Davis, *Grand Central Baking Co.*



Cast-Iron Brassicas With Roasted Red Peppers

MAKES 8 SERVINGS

A slow sauté brings out a delicious sweetness in broccoli, cauliflower and other sturdy members of the brassica family. "This recipe is really a technique with lots of wiggle room. In this version I use a lot of romanesco because it was in my CSA box," says Piper Davis. "Aside from its quirky, Star Trekkie look, it's a delicious vegetable."

- 3 to 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large onion, sliced
- 1 head of cauliflower, trimmed and separated into florets
- 1 head of romanesco or broccoli, trimmed and separated into florets
- 2 cloves garlic, coarsely chopped
- 2 red peppers, roasted, seeded, peeled and diced, or 1 cup diced canned roasted pepper
- 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- Salt
- 2 tablespoons chopped Italian parsley
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Set a large cast-iron skillet or heavy sauté pan over medium-high heat. Add olive oil, heat until shimmering, then add onions. Sauté onions, stirring often, until limp and beginning to color. Add the cauliflower, romanesco or broccoli, garlic, roasted red pepper and red pepper flakes. Season with salt. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook for 30 to 45 minutes, until the vegetables begin to caramelize and char a bit on the edges. Add parsley. Taste for seasoning and add salt and pepper. Serve warm or at room temperature.

— From Piper Davis, Grand Central Baking Co.



Butternut Squash Gratin

MAKES 8 SERVINGS

"I love the contrast of sweet, creamy squash and salty breadcrumbs in this hearty side dish," says Piper Davis. "I highly recommend you make your own breadcrumbs by grinding day-old or toasted artisan bread in a food processor. Make a big batch and store them in a sealed container, where they will last for several months."

- 1 (2- to 3-pound) butternut squash
- Extra-virgin olive oil, for the baking sheet
- ¼ cup unsalted butter, at room temperature
- ¼ cup half-and-half
- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Slice squash in half, scoop out seeds and place flesh-side down on a well oiled baking sheet. Roast for 30 to 40 minutes, until a knife slices easily through the flesh and the skin is blistered.

When cool enough to handle, carefully pull the skin off the squash. Place squash, butter, half-and-half, egg, salt and pepper in the bowl of a stand mixer. Using the paddle attachment, mix on medium-low speed until well-combined.

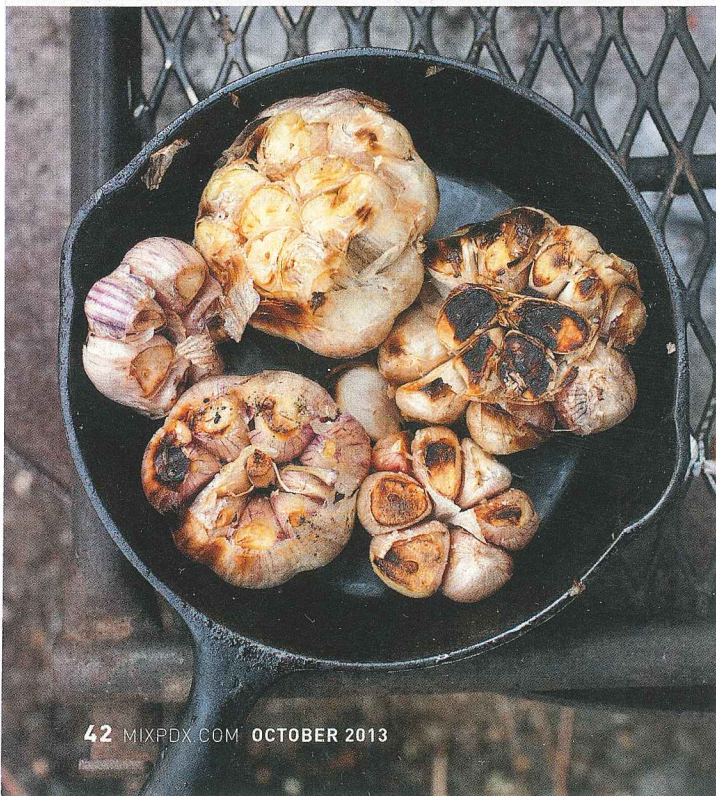
For the topping:

- 2 cups fresh breadcrumbs
- 4 large fresh sage leaves, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 3 tablespoons melted unsalted butter

To make the topping: In a small bowl, combine the breadcrumbs, sage and salt. Pour melted butter over breadcrumbs and toss to coat.

To assemble and bake: Spread squash mixture in a large well-seasoned cast-iron skillet or a buttered 2-quart baking dish. Top with the buttery breadcrumbs and bake for 30 to 40 minutes, until the squash is heated through and the breadcrumbs are golden brown and crisp.

— From Piper Davis, Grand Central Baking Co.



Gwenyth's Baked Apples

MAKES 8 BAKED APPLES

"My mom makes this old-fashioned dessert when the apples are ripe in the family orchard in Goldendale," says Piper Davis. For an elegant touch, serve it with a drizzle of heavy cream and reduced apple cider or Calvados. Choose medium-sized apples, preferably a red variety with a relatively thick skin to keep the apples from bursting.

- ½ cup packed golden brown sugar
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- ½ cup finely chopped walnuts or pecans
- ½ cup rolled oats
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¾ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ cup (4 ounces) butter, at room temperature
- 8 medium apples

Optional toppings: Heavy cream or sweetened whipped cream, apple syrup or Calvados

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a small bowl, stir together brown sugar, granulated sugar, nuts, oats and cinnamon. Add the vanilla and the butter; work the butter into the mixture with your fingers.

Using a melon baller or a sharp knife, core apples from the top (stem end), being careful not to cut a hole in the blossom end. Use a paring knife to score a line through the skin around the top of the apples. This helps keep the apple from splitting during baking.

Place apples close together in a buttered glass or ceramic baking dish. Pack filling mixture into holes, letting filling overflow a little. Bake for about 1 hour, or until apples are soft and filling is bubbly. Serve warm, with a drizzle of Calvados or apple syrup and heavy cream or a dollop of sweetened whipped cream.

— Adapted from Gwen Bassetti, Grand Central Baking Co.



Pine Street Bakery's Savory Biscuits

MAKES 12 LARGE BISCUITS

Piper Davis' sister, Megan Davis, owns Pine Street Bakery in Hood River, where she makes savory biscuits from flour grown and milled in The Dalles. Megan slices the biscuits to make breakfast sandwiches, but they're just as good mounded in a basket for your brunch or dinner table.

- 4 cups (1 pound) whole-wheat pastry flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh herbs, such as parsley, sage and rosemary
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 1 cup (2 sticks) cold unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch cubes
- ½ cup shredded cheddar cheese
- 1¼ to 1½ cups buttermilk (divided)

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

In the bowl of a stand mixer, combine the flour, baking powder, baking soda, herbs and salt. Mix on low speed for about 10 seconds to combine. Add the butter and continue mixing until the flour looks mealy. (You should be able to see pieces of butter ranging between the size of a dime and a quarter.) Mix in the shredded cheese.

Make a well in flour mixture and add 1 cup buttermilk. Mix on low just until dough comes together; it will look rough. Scrape dough from the sides and bottom of the bowl. Add ¼ cup more buttermilk and mix again to incorporate any floury scraps (there should still be visible chunks of butter and flour). If it is dry and crumbly, add the remaining 4 tablespoons buttermilk, one tablespoon at a time, mixing no more than one rotation after each addition.

Turn dough out onto a clean, lightly floured work surface. Use your hands to gently gather the dough into an oblong shape 1½ to 2 inches thick. Using a 2½-inch biscuit cutter, cut the dough into rounds. Gather the scraps, layering pieces on top of each other, and gently pat dough out to the right thickness and cut out more biscuits.

Arrange biscuits in rows on the prepared pan. Bake in the center of oven for about 35 minutes, or until deep golden brown, rotating pan halfway through. Serve immediately.

— From Megan Davis, Pine Street Bakery, Hood River