

# THE RURAL DIARIES

Love, Livestock, and  
Big Life Lessons  
Down on Mischief Farm

HILARIE BURTON MORGAN

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Quote on page 5 attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson comes from the subtitle of the play *Admiral Guinea*.

Quote from page 39 attributed to L. M. Montgomery comes from a TV series adaptation of Montgomery's books.

Quote on page 193 attributed to Gabriel García Márquez comes from the book *Living to Tell the Tale*.

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## Turkey Wars

The very first Thanksgiving Jeffrey and I had together, he came to North Carolina to celebrate the holiday with my family. They'd met only once before. I was mildly nervous. "I'll make the turkey," my mother said. She'd made the turkey my whole life.

"No, no," Jeffrey replied. "*I'll be making the turkey.*"

Good lord. It was like watching two alpha animals circle and size each other up before mauling one another. It was settled that they *both* would be making a turkey, and all our guests would vote on which was better. So Jeffrey and my mother went to town. Mom brined hers. Jeffrey went with injections for his. They jockeyed over oven space, and a copious amount of shit was talked.

But no one had considered what all the guests would be doing while this cook-off took place. Decades before, my preschool teacher Mrs. Allison had given my mother a recipe for "Witches Brew," a hot harvest drink meant to warm up even the coldest of days. As kids, we were given the booze-free version of this sugary treat (Mrs. Allison was fond of adding a splash of whiskey to her brew), but as grownups, we discovered that it lived up to its name as an instigator of debauchery. Naturally, this particular Thanksgiving during the Turkey Wars, Witches Brew was readily available and a huge hit with our crowd.

Before the first course even started, the adults had dissolved into a mess of giggles and unruliness. My friend Nick had wanted to contribute, and so he labored for days over a butternut squash bisque. Everyone cackled as he tried to steady himself enough to ladle it out

at each place setting. By the time the turkeys were presented for judgment, it was a lost cause. Jeff tried my mother's. "It's fabulous," he admitted. My mother sampled his recipe. "Oh God, that's good!" she exclaimed.

What had started off as a wildly stressful cage match became a love-fest of food, family, and friends. And I had the Witches Brew to thank.

## Witches Brew

Keep in mind that this recipe is from the 1980s!

6 tea bags of your choice (I use a spice tea)

1 can frozen orange juice

1 can frozen lemonade

3 cinnamon sticks

1 tablespoon cloves

Grab the biggest pot in your kitchen and add 4 quarts of water. Bring to a slow boil and add the tea bags. Let steep for 7 minutes. Remove the tea bags and add the frozen juice, lemonade, cinnamon sticks, and cloves. Simmer on medium heat for at least 30 minutes. To serve, strain out the spices and ladle into a teacup. Splash in a healthy dose of whiskey to make it interesting.



## My Magic Potion

From the age of three until, well . . . now, Gus has told his peers, doctors, teachers, and anyone else who will listen that his mother is a witch. It began with a "monsters in the closet" situation, where I cast a protection spell on his bedroom and assured him I could hex anything. Including my age. Young Gus believed that the blood-red liquid in my glass each evening was a supernatural elixir meant to disguise my true age of 108 and keep me young forever. Close. It was really a mixture of raw apple cider vinegar, lemon juice, and beet juice.

Coming off of *One Tree Hill*, my whole body was toxic. I'd had a hell of a good time getting into such bad shape. But if I was gonna be a back-to-nature earth mama, I needed some natural support to get back on track. Hence, my potion.

First, the lemon juice. Lemon has been credited with relieving stress and energizing your body, while lowering blood pressure, flushing out toxins, reducing the production of free radicals, which age you, and keeping your teeth and mouth healthy. Beet juice helps me with my low iron. (Ladies, ever feel like your hair is thinning at the temples? I did after childbirth. Low iron is the culprit!) Headaches? Shortness of breath? Dizziness? I used to think in my late teens and early twenties that I was having anxiety attacks. Nope. Iron again. Beets have all the earthy goodness that we need to recoup after a hard day and replenish energy. They are a magical root that grounds your body.

And then there's the most important ingredient, apple cider vinegar. I could go on and on about the advantages of ACV, which has been

used for thousands of years as a cure-all. But for me, its most important job was fixing my skin. I had horrible, embarrassing acne for years. Dermatologists threw all manner of chemicals at me, but nothing worked. In the end, I realized that my body's pH was off—probably from eating too much sugar. Consuming ACV reset that. And facials made of ACV, local honey, and a touch of lemon did wonders to clear my skin and lighten up any dark scars.

## Hilarie's Magic Potion

8 ounces apple cider vinegar

8 ounces beet juice

4 ounces lemon juice

Water

In a large jar or pitcher, mix together apple cider vinegar, beet juice, and lemon juice. (I keep this in the fridge, and it lasts a little longer than a week.) Each night, fill a glass half full of the mixture and then dilute it with cold water to fill the glass.

It takes a minute to acclimate to the taste, since it's puckery and earthy. But as I explained to Gus, it's magic, a potion that contains the elements of nature. Water. The beet represents earth. The lemon is light and bright like the air. And the apple cider vinegar burns like fire.



## Burton Pickle Recipes

Mom's pickles were a big deal. Our kitchen was always stocked with her mustard seeds, her dill, her sugar (depending on whether we were making sweet pickles or sour pickles), and a lot of vinegar. The pickles were one of the ways I could tell my parents really loved each other. It was chaos at our house during the day, but when Dad came home from work and saw Mom's pickles on the table, his favorite, he would get that "I love you" look in his eye. You don't have to say "I love you" when you're acting it out. My parents don't exchange cards and gifts, but they've always done meaningful things for each other to express their love.

Of course I make pickles too. Gus is a pickle nut. He has to have them in his lunch box every single day. Jeffrey and Gus love everything really spicy so I began growing jalapeños and cucumbers in the garden to make sweet, hot pickles. My mom always wanted me to hold on to my Iowa roots, so she and I spent a lot of time together pickling and canning. I joke with my mother about writing a cookbook called *Piss and Vinegar*. These two recipes would definitely be included.

### Fresh-Packed Dill Pickles

Making a fresh-packed pickle keeps the cucumbers crunchy, rather than soft and cooked when they are canned. That said, they don't last as long either, so I make them in smaller batches.

**18 to 20 pickling cucumbers (3 to 3½ inches long)**

**3¾ cups water**

**2½ cups vinegar (5% to 6% acidity) (I use white vinegar, and Mom uses apple cider vinegar)**

**¼ cup + 1 tablespoon pickling or noniodized salt**

**3 heads fresh dill**

**3 slices onion, ½ inch thick**

**3 cloves garlic**

**1 tsp mustard seeds**

**Peppercorns, to taste**

**Optional: Jalapeño, sliced into ¼ inch pieces (if you want a kick!)**

**3 sterilized quart jars (dunk 'em in boiling water)**

Wash cucumbers. Mix water, vinegar, and salt in a Dutch oven; bring to a boil. Add a head of dill, a clove of garlic, and an onion slice to each of three hot quart jars. Sprinkle the mustard seeds evenly amongst the jars and add jalapeños if desired. Keep in mind, the more jalapeño seeds you put in, the hotter your pickles will be! Pack cucumbers in jars, leaving ½ inch headspace. Cover with brine, leaving ½ inch headspace. Let cucumbers and pickling juice cool completely before screwing on lids and refrigerating.

Store in the fridge.

## **Quick Pickles**

My dad really likes quick pickles. He likes them sweet, so my mom uses rice wine vinegar instead of apple cider vinegar and sugar instead of salt.

**18 to 20 pickling cucumbers (3 to 3½ inches long), cut into round slices ¼ inch thick**

**3¾ cups water**

**2½ cups rice wine vinegar**

*(continued)*



**¼ cup + 1 tablespoon sugar**

**3 slices onion, ½ inch thick**

**Mustard seeds, to taste**

**Peppercorns, to taste**

**Salt**

**Optional: Chili flakes or chili pepper**

Wash cucumbers. Mix water, vinegar, and sugar; toss in onions, mustard seeds, peppercorns, and a pinch of salt. I add chili flakes or some sort of chili pepper to the quick pickles. (We make everything sweet-hot.) Everything should be to your taste; that's the beauty of making things at home.

You don't need to cook the brine. Instead, pack cucumbers in jars, pour the brine over the cucumbers, screw on lids, and set the jars in the fridge. They'll be ready to eat in a couple of hours; they're even better the next day!

Store in the fridge.

And honey, you can pickle anything you pull out of the garden—carrots, green beans, onions, watermelon rinds. Get creative! Hell, pickled tomatoes are better than any ketchup.



## Rhubarb Preserves

Rhubarb takes a couple of seasons to come in; you have to plant it and let it grow for two years. So while I still had to earn my gardening stripes at Mischief Farm, I pillaged the farmers' market for the best rhubarb, with its bright pink and red stalks. My great-grandfather, Dirk Kolenbrander, used to make a strawberry-rhubarb preserve that he would send through relatives to us, all the way from Iowa, where he was a reverend. He was a regal-looking man, with snow-white hair and vintage browline glasses that were so old they became hip again. He wore inexpensive but beautiful suits and raised bright children with my great-grandma Nellie.

The image of this elegant man rolling up his sleeves and making preserves in between writing sermons always captivated me. The preserves would arrive in recycled plastic containers, and us kids would crowd around the table, where mom would slather hunks of bread with Great-Grandpa-Dirk-strawberry-rhubarb preserves and dole them out. Then Mom added rhubarb to the strawberries in her garden so she could make it too. Now I use that recipe to make my own preserves.

I'm a preservationist, and Jeffrey is too. In a way, moving to Rhinebeck was an act of preservation. Both self-preservation and also the preservation of a set of ideals—volunteerism and community.

After watching the mom-and-pop shops of our childhoods get swallowed up by big box stores and strip malls, we'd found a new, safe place in Rhinebeck. Losing Ira was hard, and the idea of losing

*Samuel's was devastating, given the twenty years of love Ira had put in to the store, giving all of us in town a place we considered "our spot."*

*Ira had planted the shop. We were gonna keep making the jam.*

## **Kolenbrander Strawberry-Rhubarb Jam**

**2 cups fresh strawberries, crushed**

**4 cups chopped fresh rhubarb**

**¼ cup bottled lemon juice**

**1 package (1¾ ounces) powdered fruit pectin**

**5½ cups sugar**

In a Dutch oven, combine strawberries, rhubarb, and lemon juice. Stir in pectin. Bring to a full rolling boil, stirring constantly. Stir in sugar. Return to a full rolling boil. Boil and stir for 1 minute. Remove from heat. Skim off foam. Ladle hot mixture into six hot, sterilized pint jars, leaving ¼ inch headspace. Remove air bubbles and adjust headspace if necessary by adding hot mixture. Wipe rims. Center lids of jars. Screw on bands until fingertip tight.

Place jars into canner with simmering water, ensuring they are completely covered with water. Bring to a boil. Process for 5 minutes. Remove jars and cool.



## Zucchini for the Win

Sometimes you just really need a win, an easy layup, a sure thing. During that first year at Mischief Farm, when I was desperately searching for signs that we'd made the right choice and everything was going to be okay, little things could make or break me. Success in the garden was the best of the best signs. And the zucchini in particular were glorious for my ego.

Honestly, it's a pretty easy plant. The seeds are big and easy to manage. The plants aren't fussy about water. And once you get them going, they churn out an absurd amount of food. The blossoms are the loveliest of delicacies, and by now we've all seen zucchini ribbons served as pasta, or baked with parmesan cheese, or turned into addictive zucchini bread. Zucchini is a gem with many talents.

I wanted to find a way to use the abundance of eggs our hens were laying with the heaping baskets of zucchini we gathered multiple times a week. Hence, this Mischief Farm take on the classic Eggs Benedict.

## Zucchini Fritter Benedict (Vegetarian)

### FOR THE FRITTERS

- 1 pound zucchini (about 2 medium/large around 12 inches long)
- 1 teaspoon + ½ teaspoon kosher or sea salt
- 2 eggs, beaten
- Zest of one lemon
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme
- ¼ cup chopped scallion
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- Canola oil for pan

### FOR THE SAUCE

- ½ cup crème fraîche
- 1½ tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon mayonnaise
- 1 teaspoon hot sauce
- 1 teaspoon lemon zest
- Paprika
- 3 chives, chopped

### FOR THE POACHED EGGS

- 4 fresh eggs
- Rice vinegar
- Salt

Trim ends of zucchini. Grate and place in fine-mesh colander; mix with 1 teaspoon salt and let sit for 10 minutes with colander draining over a bowl.

Meanwhile, make sauce. Mix crème fraîche with lemon juice, mustard, mayo, and hot sauce. Stir in zest and chives.

*(continued)*

Squeeze out remaining liquid from zucchini using a clean dish towel. You should have around 2 cups of zucchini. Place in a mixing bowl and add beaten eggs, lemon zest, thyme, and scallion.

In a small bowl combine  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt, flour, baking powder, and black pepper. Sprinkle over the zucchini mixture and combine.

Heat 2 tablespoons canola oil in a nonstick skillet over medium high heat.

Add 2-tablespoon scoops of batter into the pan and flatten with a spatula. Cook until golden brown, about 2 minutes; then flip and cook the other side until golden brown. Place in warming drawer or oven set at a low temperature.

To poach the eggs, boil water in a saucepan and then reduce to a simmer. Add rice vinegar and salt to water.

Crack eggs into a cup one at a time. Create a vortex with a whisk in the water and slip eggs, one at a time, into hot water. Cook for 4 minutes. Remove egg and let dry on paper towel.

Place a fritter on a plate and put a poached egg on top. Drizzle with sauce and sprinkle lightly with paprika and chopped chives.

ENJOY!!



## Dandelion Wine

Ray Bradbury's book *Dandelion Wine* is my favorite book of all time. I picked up my first copy in a tiny bookshop in the West Village when I was nineteen. I own first-edition copies and autographed copies. I keep multiple copies in my basement at all times to hand out at a moment's notice and have gifted the book to more people than I can count. I own a wine label from Bradbury Vineyards signed by Ray himself. I possess glass paperweights with whole dandelion puffs encased inside, and I drink dandelion tea at least four times a week. All of this is to say, the sense memory that dandelions provide is dear to me.

For hundreds of years, these vibrant plants have been regarded as medicine, an elixir for the body and mind. Bradbury's book is an homage to the small town he grew up in, a collection of short stories woven together through the eyes of two young brothers. That life-style is what I always wanted for my children and for my family. When I found Rhinebeck, I found the town I'd always pictured in my mind. So naturally, making my own dandelion wine was a priority when I moved to the farm.

Each spring our fields become a sea of golden flowers, signaling that winter's spell has been broken. That's the kind of magic you want to bottle up and save for a gray day. Now our family calls dandelions Bisoullions, and our concoction is a serum of love and family and earth and hope. It's our spring ritual, collection day falling between Jeff's birthday at the end of April and Mother's Day in May. The recipe

*changes a bit from year to year. A touch more local honey. Lemons to remember that first night Jeff and I met. But it always tastes like sunshine and hard work.*

## Dandelion Wine

**1 gallon yellow dandelion petals (pinch them out and remove all the green)**

**1 gallon water**

**2 oranges (zest and juice)**

**2 lemons (zest and juice)**

**1-inch piece of ginger root**

**Add-ins, to taste: Honey, golden raisins, rose petals, cinnamon, clove berries—anything that makes you think of summer!**

**3 pounds sugar**

**1 packet wine yeast (you can buy champagne yeast online)**

Collect 1 gallon of petals from fully bloomed dandelions, pinching the petals out of the green sepals. (The greens hold much of the bitterness typically associated with dandelions.) Put the petals in an extra-large stainless steel stock pot. Bring water to a boil. Pour 1 gallon boiling water over the petals. Make sure all the petals are covered, put a large dish towel over the top, and let the mixture sit for three days. Stir once a day with a wooden spoon.

After three days, strain the water from the flowers. Lay out cheesecloth and scoop out a bunch of the soggy petal mix. Twist the cheesecloth up to squeeze all the excess liquid into the pot. Repeat until you have drained all the summertime magic from Every. Single. Petal.

I put the used-up petals into my garden at this point. Not sure they do any good, but it feels like good karma to return them from whence they came.

*(continued)*



Add to the pot the orange and lemon zest and juice, ginger, and any other special add-in ingredients to make it your own. Then slowly add the sugar, stirring constantly as you bring the mixture to a low boil for 20 minutes. Let liquid cool to room temperature.

In a separate, small bowl, mix the yeast with  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup warm water. Let it sit for 5 minutes to proof. Stir the yeast mixture into the pot of dandelion liquid. Filter out any solids through a fine-mesh strainer as you distribute the wine mix into sterilized, airtight jars. Make sure to leave plenty of headroom in the jar so nothing bursts as it ferments!

You'll see bubbles form in the jar as your wine ferments from six days to three weeks. Once the fermentation stops, filter the liquid through a cheesecloth-lined strainer as you pour it into sterilized glass bottles. Put a balloon over the top of each bottle to keep an eye on any further fermentation. If it remains deflated for more than twenty-four hours, the process is done. Cork the bottle. Let sit for six months, preferably somewhere cool and dark like a basement. Then, just as the chill of autumn starts creeping in, your reminder of warmer days is ready to keep you company.



## Cooking for Martha Stewart

While I was pregnant with George, *Allrecipes* magazine asked me to do a presentation.

I said, "OKay."

A few days later they called back: "Oh, by the way, it's going to be a cook-off with another person."

I said, "OKay."

They called again: "Oh, by the way, we need you to do a recipe that's totally your own."

I said, "OKay."

They called yet again: "Oh, by the way, the other person is going to be Dorinda Medley, of *Real Housewives*. Famous for her elaborate dinner parties."

And I still said, "OKay." But now I was nervous.

So my mother came and we hit the local farm stands and bought in-season local ingredients. Adding in my own eggs and jalapeños and blueberries from the garden, we laid everything out before us and brainstormed.

*Allrecipes* reached out one more time.

"Guess who's going to be judging? Martha!"

Say what? Martha Friggen Stewart would be judging the contest. (Side note: I was the teen who did not subscribe to *Vogue* or *Cosmo*; I had *Martha Stewart Living* delivered to my college dorm.)

Martha Stewart was everything I dreamed she would be. Immac-

ulate, formidable, and gorgeous. I swallowed any pride I had and asked for a photo with her. Dorinda made me do it.

## Sweet Hot Corn Cake

### FOR THE SYRUP

- 1 cup blackberries
- ¼ cup honey
- ½ cup fresh-squeezed orange juice (I used a tangelo)
- 2 tablespoons orange juice
- 1 teaspoon cornstarch

### FOR THE CORN CAKE

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- ½ cup yellow cornmeal
- ¼ cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1¼ cups buttermilk
- 3 tablespoons honey
- 2 large eggs
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- 1 ear fresh corn, kernels sliced off and cob milked
  - (to milk the corn, after you slice off the kernels, run the blunt edge of your knife down cob and reserve any leftover pulp and liquid)
- 2 jalapeños, seeds and ribs removed, chopped
- ½ cup blackberries
- Zest of 1 orange
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme
- Butter for frying

*(continued)*

Start the syrup first. In a saucepan, combine blackberries, honey, and orange juice. Bring to a boil and then reduce heat to a simmer. Let simmer so the berries cook down for 10 minutes while you prepare the corn cake.

In a large bowl, combine the dry ingredients—flour, cornmeal, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. In a separate bowl, mix your wet ingredients—buttermilk, honey, eggs, melted butter, corn, corn milk, orange zest, thyme, and jalapeños.

Combine wet and dry ingredients.

Slice blackberries into small chunks, removing any thick cores if needed. Gently fold blackberries into cornmeal batter.

Pour blackberry syrup mixture through a fine-mesh strainer. In a small bowl, combine 2 tablespoons orange juice with cornstarch. Combine well. Add small amounts of blackberry liquid to cornstarch mixture to bring the temperature up. Then add it all to the remaining blackberry liquid in a saucepan. Bring the mixture back up to a boil to thicken. Remove from heat; let cool.

Melt some butter in a nonstick skillet over medium heat. For each corn cake, add ¼ cup batter to skillet and cook until golden brown on each side.

Plate warm corn cake and top with a tab of butter. Drizzle with blackberry syrup, serve, and ENJOY!