Potluck Two Ways: Day One at Woodlawn with the Quakers and Arcadia Farm

Or How to Overthink A Salad

By Susan Lutz

Sunday. “First Day,” as the Quakers would say. It is also my first day as The Inner Loop Writer-in-Residence at Woodlawn-Arcadia. To get this great gig, I pitched myself as a food writer who wanted to explore the ways that architecture and landscape of a place affect the food we grow (and eat) and the kinds of community we create. To achieve this, my plan was to eat as many meals with as many people in as many places as I could. And hopefully find out a little bit about the Woodlawn community and it’s many residents.

It had all seemed so simple a few days ago when I’d arranged my schedule with a few quick phone calls. I’d attend a Quaker meeting at 11 am, followed by my first potluck. I’d have a brief afternoon break, then head back to the property for a few hours of work at Arcadia Farm. After that, I’d attend my second potluck of the day, this time with cocktails.

Now for the real challenge—figuring out what kind of food to bring to each of the potlucks. They were very different groups, and I was a little anxious about it. The first potluck would be shared
with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), whose meetinghouse greets visitors at the entrance to Woodlawn. It’s a welcoming entrance, flanked by a Little Lending Library and a cheery bright blue sign that reads: “#Love They Neighbor (No Exceptions)”. Besides these introductory signs, all I knew about the Quakers was the fact that my husband’s ancestors had helped found a Quaker meetinghouse in Maryland in 1771. It was a daunting task to figure out what to bring to a potluck attended by people I knew nothing about.

I decided to look to my garden for inspiration. At this point in the summer we were ready to harvest lettuce, spinach, radishes, and a variety of herbs, so a salad seemed like the obvious choice. The Quakers at Woodlawn originally came to Virginia as farmers and I suspected that their descendants would appreciate fresh greens. But a salad didn’t seem quite enough for the occasion. I was an outsider being welcomed into the group and I wanted to contribute something more substantial. I decided to add asparagus, tomatoes, and roasted chicken to the mix. I wondered if Quakers were vegetarian. To be safe, I made a composed salad, with each ingredient lined up in neat rows in case someone wanted to avoid the chicken.

I arrived at the Friend’s silent morning meeting. This was followed by the potluck, where my anxiety shifted into high gear as I saw the already-long line for food. Carrying my large salad bowl, I had to push my way through the line, uttering many quiet “Excuse Me’s” along the way, desperately trying not to seem rude. As I gently poured dressing on my carefully composed salad, a member of the hospitality committee seemed to recognize my anxiety. He alleviated it by flinging all the separate ingredients together with gusto. So much for the “composition.” I smiled. I even relaxed a little bit.

The meal itself was fascinating and fun. When I looked around the food table I saw pizza, lentil soup, several versions of mac and cheese, and a number of salads. There was even an entire second table just for desserts. These were my kind of people.

I sat down to eat with Judy Riggin, co-clerk of the meeting, and talked about the history of potlucks at the Friends meetings. Within a few minutes, people began cycling in and out of the chairs on either side of me.

Martha Catlin, historian for the Alexandria Monthly Meeting at Woodlawn, explained that hospitality is a cornerstone of Quaker life. I was witnessing this principle in action. We talked about why there were so many comfort foods at the table and how everyone looked forward to one Friend’s delicious soup and how much they loved it when Leslie brought her special salad. We discussed how difficult it could be to contribute some dishes, like corn pudding, which were crowd favorites but didn’t travel especially well. I realized that I did indeed feel comforted, not only by the food itself but by the attention that was given to serving the group, feeding both mind and spirit in the process. I left the meeting feeling embraced by the Friends I’d met and hoping to join them again soon. I might even attempt to bring corn pudding.

I drove home and had just enough time to change into work clothes, make a second composed salad—this time with tuna instead of roasted chicken—and head out the door again.

Back at Woodlawn, I drove past the meetinghouse and Arcadia Farm to park in front of the Frank Lloyd Wright House. As I crossed in front of Woodlawn mansion, second salad of the day in hand,
I wondered what it must have been like to live there. A long series of people had done so over the past two centuries, beginning with Nelly Custis, granddaughter of George Washington, and her husband Lawrence Lewis, Washington’s favorite nephew. Over the years, the house had been inhabited by a series of creative thinkers. I would spend the next week finding out more. But today was about potlucks.

I roamed through the garden to find Pamela Hess, director of Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food & Agriculture. I’d met Pam before and knew that I’d probably find her working. I eventually came across her walking around with a collection of long-handled forks and hoes. She smoothly made introductions to the assembled crowd and put us to work. The regulars were assigned the task of digging a Three-Sisters garden—corn, beans, and squash planted together in a single hill. The newbies and less experienced gardeners were sent to a distant field to plant and water 100 watermelon plants.

As a newbie I ended up on watermelon duty, but was given a pass on the planting so that I’d have a chance to talk to Pam first. Knowing how to keep a crowd productively working, Pam was as much entertainer as educator, telling me about Arcadia’s mission between rounds of ghost stories for the “Three Sisters” crowd. But Pam’s passion for agricultural education and sustainable food practices came through loud and clear.

The bi-weekly “Farm Tonic” potluck started three years ago after the only full-time farmer on the property quit out of exhaustion. Looking for a way to get some real help for ongoing farm projects while also creating an opportunity for community engagement, the Farm Tonic was born.
Every other week volunteers work a two-hour shift on the farm, followed by cocktails and a potluck dinner in the evening shade. Unlike the well-oiled machine of the Quaker potluck, the Farm Tonic is a more haphazard affair, but with equally happy results. Pam mixed up delicious Pomegranate Rosé Cocktails, while the rest of us dug food out of coolers and the on-site refrigerator. We ate a stunningly delicious fresh-baked challah, a collection of fruits and nuts from various sources, hummus, baba ganoush and pita from a local Mediterranean bakery, with brownies to top it off.

One young couple hadn’t brought food because they didn’t expected to stay as long as they did. They said didn’t feel right about eating without contributing and squirmed with embarrassment until we all convinced them that they had in fact contributed— not with food, but with physical labor and great stories.

Of course, the great thing about a potluck is that it always works out in the end one way or another. The couple was eventually convinced that they were not only welcome, but that we all truly wanted and needed them to share in the fun as they had shared in the work.
And for me, that was a moment of insight. My anxiety about finding the perfect dish for two different potlucks was completely misplaced. Quakers and urban farmers are just like me, valuing good food, hard work, and companionship. This is the simple message of the Potluck: bring anything – or nothing – and it will be all right.

But it was also a wonderful introduction to the place called Woodlawn. Here, a 19th Century mansion, a Quaker meeting house, a mid-century Frank Lloyd Wright home and a sustainable farm all share land, passion and occasionally food – a composed salad of delicious ingredients that I would get to taste in various combinations for the next week of my residency.