



A testament to the taste of place in all the best ways possible. . . This book hits all the perfect notes for anyone interested in regional cuisines, no matter where they live.

—*Tracey Ryder, Co-FOUNDER OF RIDGE COMMUNITIES, INC.*

STORIES AND SEASONAL RECIPES *from*  
CHEFS, FARMERS, AND ARTISANS  
*of the GREAT PLAINS*

new  
prairie  
kitchen

Summer Miller

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Dana Damewood

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Summer Miller  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY Dana Damwood

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New Prairie Kitchen

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*For my husband, Steve Widhalm, and our children, Jackson and Juniper.*

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## Introduction

Through food, we start conversations, settle arguments, and come together in these hectic times. Food is how we celebrate our achievements, comfort the grief stricken, and simply connect to those around us. A meal is both community and communion.

Great Plains states are often referred to as “flyover” country, meaning there aren’t many reasons to stop here and look around. These prairie states are typically known for commodity production of corn, soybeans, beef, and pork. Recently, however, a “good food” movement has begun percolating in the region, creating a delicious clash of Old Prairie meets New Prairie, where delicacies such as bison, ground cherries, and sunchoke are used in new and interesting ways. Sure, we still have traditional steak houses in Nebraska—most of which can grill a mean flat iron—and Iowa still raises plenty of commodity pork. But we also have phenomenally talented farmers who grow asparagus thick as your thumb and tender as a strawberry, and chefs who transform it into edible art.

Food is the plate upon which we serve our humanity. A dish is perfectly made not when the spices are balanced or the texture is just right, but when the intention in offering it to another person is pure. I believe such intention can be tasted, that the heart of the cook and the soul of the farmer season the dish. Good food does not have to be pretentious. It can be humble, complex, beautiful, simple, and mouthwatering—and it can come from the minds, hands, and hearts of those in flyover country.

Small local farms and the chefs who support them contribute to our communities through their entrepreneurial spirit, the collaborative nature of their relationships, and the basic act of nourishing others. Skilled farmers know which plants taste better if harvested in cooler weather—broccoli, kale, and brussels sprouts among them. When broccoli has been harvested at the right time and grown in the correct conditions, it’s tender and almost sweet, which means my children will eat it and my family will be healthier for it. A tomato that ripens on the vine at the peak of the summer is a great-tasting tomato. It’s food worth waiting for, worth savoring, and worth serving to the people I love.

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*It’s food worth waiting for, worth savoring, and worth serving to the people I love.*

As a mother and a lover of good food, I have an urgent desire to raise my children with a sense of place; to build up around them a life full of flavor, history, and humility—a life full of people who are inspired by their work and who consider the impact of that work on the greater good.

I come from a family of entrepreneurs. I have seen what it takes to start something, to pour your heart into it, and to risk everything to make it succeed. I admire the grit it takes to build a living from a dream and the integrity required to stay true to your values when times are lean. The best gift we can give ourselves and those we love is an intimate understanding of authentic flavors, people, and places.

*New Prairie Kitchen* pays homage to the outstanding and innovative chefs, farmers, and artisans of Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota. They have shared some of their favorite recipes here, organized by

season and focused on regionally sourced meat, poultry, game, and produce. Profiles of these exceptional people are nestled throughout the book.

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I set out to learn a little more about what was available within a 200-mile radius of my hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. It turns out quite a bit, but it took some digging. I want buying local food and supporting restaurants that source from local farms to be easier, which is why a resource directory with contact information for every farm, artisan, and restaurant mentioned can be found in the back of this book (p. 226).

As you cook your way through *New Prairie Kitchen* and become acquainted with the tastes and personalities within, you may combine components of one recipe with elements of another to create an entirely new meal. You may find that you prefer the creative and vibrant regional American menus of chef Clayton Chapman from The Grey Plume, or the light, vegetable-laden fare of Maggie Pleskac from Maggie's Vegetarian Cafe. This book offers opportunities for those new to the kitchen as well as challenges for home cooks who consider boeuf bourguignon child's play.

My hope is that *New Prairie Kitchen* will bring your loved ones to the table to share a beautiful meal, but, more importantly, to enjoy one another's company. Ultimately, why we support anything is a personal matter and I would suspect you have your reasons. May *New Prairie Kitchen* help you on your culinary journey, wherever that may lead. ■







## ***Recipe and Ingredient Tips***

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When cooking from scratch, it can be difficult to predict exact measurements. For example, the ricotta you make might yield four or five cups, but the recipe only calls for three cups. Knowing what to do with leftover ricotta is helpful, which is why I've included some suggestions for what to do with leftover pieces, cups, and tablespoons here.

### **Braising Liquid**

Braising liquid is rich with flavor from the meat and vegetables cooked in it. Think of it like a stock. In most cases, you pour the liquid through a strainer, reduce it, and add it back to the meat. Even still, sometimes there is more liquid than needed, or life gets in the way and you don't have time to reduce it as much as you would've liked. In that case, you can pour leftover braising liquid into an ice cube tray, freeze it, and use one of the individual portions as the base for your next pot of stew. You already did the work—why not keep it and use it to build the flavor profile of your next meal? The same goes for slow-cooker juices: strain the solids and cool the liquid; once it's cold, you can scrape the fat off the top and freeze the liquid.

### **Cream and Butter**

Recipes in this book call for heavy cream and butter. I use these on a regular basis in daily meal planning. You may not, but no worries; they can be frozen and used later without negatively impacting your dish. Remove the cream from the freezer and within a day or two (depending on how much cream you froze) it will be thawed. Shake it vigorously to reincorporate the butterfat and use it as if it were never frozen. For butter, transfer it from the freezer to the refrigerator to use when needed.

If a recipe does not specify whether to use salted or unsalted butter, use unsalted.

### **Eggs**

With farm-fresh eggs, the yolks tend to be a deep, rich orange color, and in lighter-colored desserts they can create a yellowish tint to the finished product. The color shift is subtle, but it's something a baking perfectionist would definitely pick up on. You want that orange yolk; it's a good thing.

Egg whites will keep covered in the refrigerator for three to four days. This comes in handy when making Nick Strawhecker's pappardelle recipe (p. 141), which calls for a yolk-only pasta dough. If you don't plan to use the whites within four days, you can freeze them instead. You can actually freeze the whole egg and the yolks as well, although your approach will differ a bit for each.

For whole eggs, use a fork to mix the white and the yolk together before freezing. For egg whites, just freeze them. No need to do anything else. For the yolks, whisk in 1½ teaspoons of sugar or ⅛ teaspoon of salt for every four yolks before freezing to help maintain the texture or viscosity of the yolks. Ice cube trays work great for freezing eggs. Once frozen, place the egg cubes in a baggie and label them as sweetened or savory yolks, whole eggs, or whites. Don't forget to include the number of yolks or eggs per cube when you transfer them to a baggie. You can use them as you would fresh eggs, just give them 24 hours to thaw in a sealed container in the refrigerator.

*You want that orange yolk; it's a good thing.*

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Some of the recipes in this book include raw egg. Personally, I feed my family unpasteurized farm-fresh eggs, and I don't worry a bit about letting my kids eat raw cookie dough. That being said, this message is printed on the bottom of most restaurant menus: *consuming raw or undercooked eggs may increase your chance of foodborne illness, especially if you have a medical condition*. So, do what you think is in your best interest when preparing recipes that call for raw eggs or runny yolks.



## **George Paul Vinegar**

Some of the recipes in this book call for George Paul Vinegar; if you don't have it, leave it out. Do not try to replace it with typical grocery store vinegar. George Paul Vinegar is slow-batch vinegar produced in Cody, Nebraska. It's made using Nebraska grapes and is aged between 6 and 18 months, depending on the variety. The aging process concentrates the fruit flavors and aroma. You can purchase it online at [www.georgepaulvinegar.com](http://www.georgepaulvinegar.com), or, if you live in a larger city, you can find it at specialty food stores.

## **Meat**

When you are ready to venture into using different cuts of meat, sometimes you will need to preorder them from a butcher; other times you're better off purchasing a whole or half animal from a local farmer.

The first step to buying a whole animal is finding a farmer whose product you trust. You can find reputable farmers in the back of this book (p. 226), or at your local farmers' market. Many states and communities have Buy Fresh Buy Local campaigns; they are easy to find if you search the Internet for Buy Fresh Buy Local with the name of your state or city. The second step is contacting the meat processor to provide cutting instructions.

The meat processor is the closest thing we have today to the old-world concept of butchers. A

processor receives the live animal, kills it, skins it, eviscerates it, breaks it down into primal cuts, and from there, transforms it into your dinner. He or she will ask you, “How do you want it?” and you will need to tell him or her. This is typically where the processor hears crickets from your end of the line until he or she helps you understand the anatomy of the animal and your own eating habits.

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*The meat processor is the closest thing we have today to the old-world concept of butchers.*

Depending on the price you’re willing to pay, processors cut, grind, cure, smoke, precook, and shred the meat, then package it based on the needs of you and your family. This book has a recipe that calls for a broken-down whole chicken (p. 35); if you don’t want to cut up a whole chicken, ask your processor to do it for you. It’s important to understand that you will pay two people: the first is the farmer for the animal, and the second is the processor for the service he or she provides.



Typically, pork and beef should be consumed within 6 to 9 months of purchase, even when stored in a deep freezer; for poultry and rabbit it’s about 9 to 12 months. All of it is still edible beyond a year or more, but the flavor will likely be compromised. If you have only the freezer attached to your refrigerator, it is probably best to share the cost of the animal and its meat with a friend or two. Meat is good, but you probably don’t want to eat it for every meal. Plus, you will need some room in that freezer for ice cream. At least I do.

The last task is to pick up your meat and stock your freezer. In my house, I have a stand-up deep

freezer in my garage currently stuffed with wild pork, deer, two whole chickens, and a few dwindling packages of ground beef from our share of a quarter cow we purchased with some friends.

I use a freezer inventory list to help me keep track of what I have and when I need to use it, which sounds fancier than it really is. The point is to make cooking easier, not harder. It's worth the few minutes it takes to write out a freezer inventory list to help with planning meals. Jot down what you have—sausage, pork chops, bacon, shoulder, hams, loins, whole chicken, whole chicken broken down—and how much, then tape it inside one of your cupboards. When you take an item out of the freezer to use, cross it off the list. When you are changing your lifestyle from multiple trips to the store to multiple trips to your freezer, it's nice to have a plan, especially if you are cooking for a family.

If you'd rather start small and get used to the idea before purchasing a whole or half animal, it's worthwhile to build a relationship with your local meat processor or butcher (who likely works at an independent meat shop). This book uses cuts that can be difficult to find in a conventional supermarket. Specialty stores or small-town processors are more likely to supply the cuts you want.

I realize in urban areas very few people have space for a deep freezer, but if you do, it's one of the most valuable components of home cooking.

## **Onions**

If a recipe doesn't call for a certain type of onion, use yellow onions (or whatever onion you like best).

## **Pasta**

Learning to cook in stages provides you with the best opportunity to eat delicious, whole-food meals at home. In this book, a single pasta recipe will include making the pasta noodles, the tomato sauce, and the sauce base all from scratch. It's a lot to pull together on a weeknight, but if you made the noodles (and even the tomato sauce) last month and froze them, then all you need to do is thaw the pasta, whip up the base, and bring some water to a boil. Fresh pasta takes about 2 minutes to cook, whereas dried pasta from a box can take anywhere from 8 to 15 minutes.

Once you get the hang of making pasta dough from scratch, you can double or triple batches and freeze them as dough rounds, ready-to-go pasta nests, or bags of ravioli. Remove the dough from the freezer in the morning and it will be ready by dinner. I've thawed it both on the countertop and in the refrigerator.



You will see in this book that different chefs have different pasta dough recipes—some use yolks

only, while others use the whole egg. Find the recipe you favor and use that every time if you like. You can use the same dough for ravioli or noodles, and you don't need a pasta machine or attachment. I've made every batch on my countertop with a rolling pin, often with a child at each hip.

## **Ricotta**

Ricotta is a neutral-flavored cheese. You can make it sweet or savory and use it for dinner or dessert. It will keep in the fridge for about five days. You can combine it with herbs, spices, arugula, or spinach to make a fast and simple filling for ravioli, which can then be frozen. You can also fold in almond extract and drizzle with some honey to spread on toast, or serve with baked pears.

## **Salt**

Some recipes specify a type of salt to use (kosher, sea, etc.), while others do not. Where it's not specified, go with your personal preference. Always taste as you go along to prevent oversalting. ■





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