

SUMMER 2026

# fresh pickings

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE IOWA FOOD & FAMILY PROJECT

FIBER FINDS  
ITS PLACE

A PEEK INSIDE  
ZOO KITCHENS

GROWING FOOD,  
PROTECTING WATER

*EIGHT GENERATIONS OF FARMING HISTORY*



# fresh pickings

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## FRESH PICKINGS MAGAZINE

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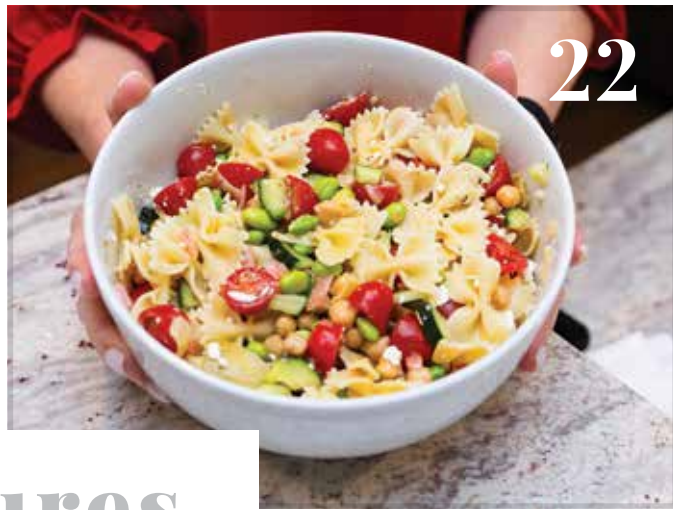
# Welcome

IN THE SUMMER ISSUE OF FRESH PICKINGS MAGAZINE,  
YOU'LL FIND STORIES THAT CELEBRATE THE INCREDIBLE  
FOOD, FARMS AND FAMILIES THAT MAKE IOWA  
A SPECIAL PLACE TO LIVE.

THIS QUARTERLY PUBLICATION IS BROUGHT TO  
YOU BY THE IOWA FOOD & FAMILY PROJECT. WE ARE AN  
INITIATIVE THAT INVITES IOWANS TO EXPLORE HOW FOOD  
IS GROWN AND RAISED AROUND THE STATE AND  
MEET THE FARMERS WHO MAKE IT HAPPEN,  
24/7, 365 DAYS A YEAR.

WE NETWORK WITH NEARLY 35 FOOD, FARMING  
AND HEALTHY LIVING ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE PROUD  
OF IOWA'S HOMEGROWN FOODS AND  
HOMETOWN VALUES.





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Conservation and "sponge farming" demonstrates how Iowa partnerships are protecting water quality — one field, wetland and watershed at a time.

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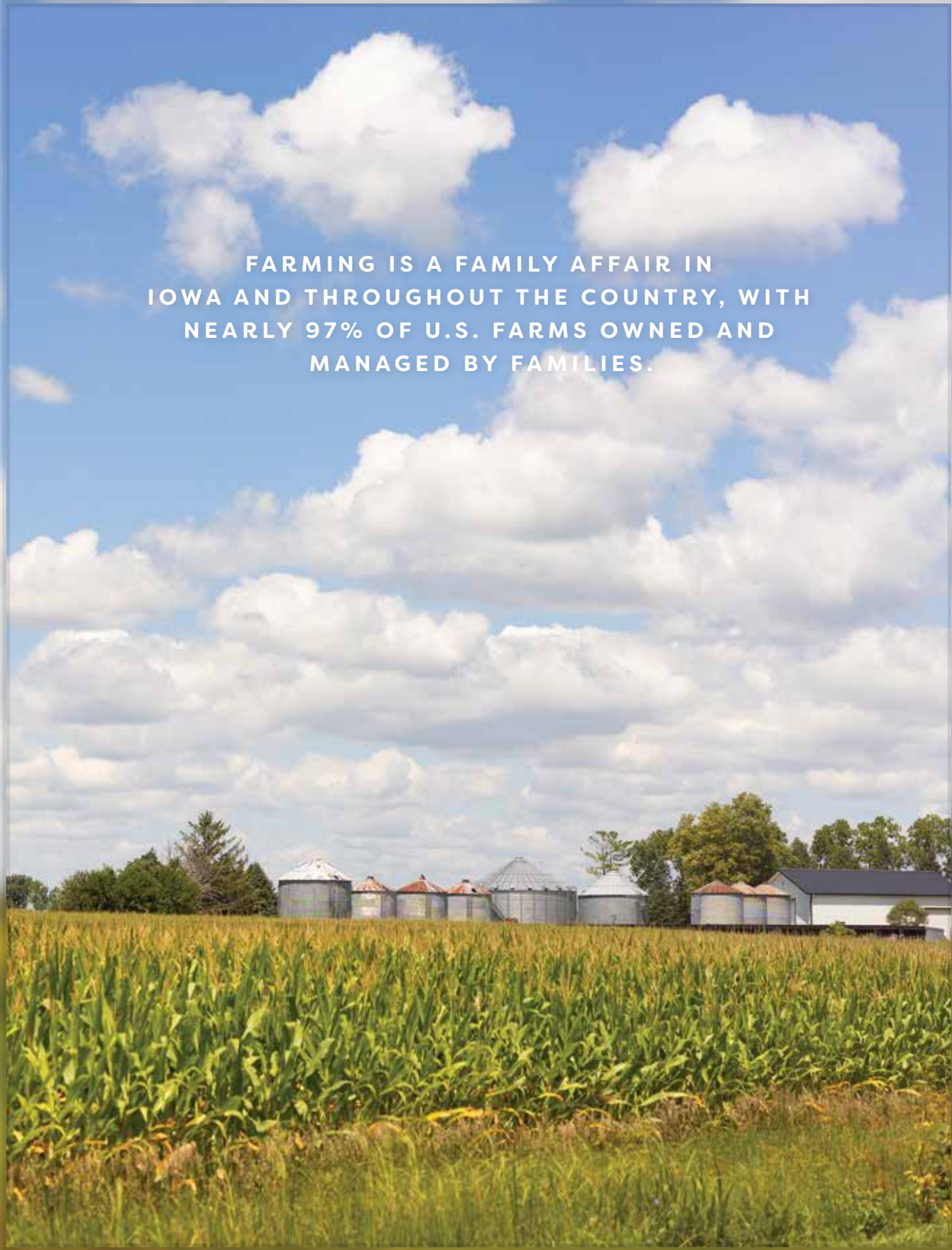
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### ON THE COVER

Three current generations of Moeckly Farms, located near Polk City. From left to right: Steve, Nick, Jacob, Jon and Tyler.

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FARMING IS A FAMILY AFFAIR IN IOWA AND THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, WITH NEARLY 97% OF U.S. FARMS OWNED AND MANAGED BY FAMILIES.

## The Summer of Movement

HOW FAIRS, FESTIVALS AND ROAD MILES CONNECT IOWA COMMUNITIES.



Iowa one mile or one meal at a time. These moments might be brief, but they add up to something bigger — a reminder that food and farming are not separate stories, but shared ones.

Agriculture is often discussed in terms of fields and planting seasons, but it offers tangible opportunities to really connect. It shows up in the conversations at fair booths, in proud exhibitors walking livestock through the ring and in the volunteers who serve meals, like the hot beef sundae, that have become traditions of their own. It's a connection you can see, hear and taste.

As the miles add up and the fair season moves across the map, so does the story of Iowa food and farming — carried by the people who live it and shared with those who are just passing through.

In a season defined by movement, it's those shared stops along the way that make Iowa feel like one connected community.

Enjoy the issue,

*Lydia Zerby*

Summer in Iowa has a way of turning the entire state into a living calendar.

From small-town streets lined with festival lights to highways filled with road trippers chasing the next stop, this season is defined by motion. County fairs pop up one after another, each with its own traditions but the same familiar energy — livestock shows in the mornings, grandstand music at night and the steady rhythm of people coming together around food, family and community pride. Add in festivals, ballgames, farmers' markets and events like RAGBRAI rolling through town after town, and it becomes clear: summer here isn't just a season; it's a shared experience in motion.

What makes it special is how seamlessly it connects us. You'll find members of rural and urban communities standing side by side at a pork chop stand, parents comparing notes at 4-H barns and travelers discovering

## A Smashing Success

BURGERS GRILLED TO PERFECTION AND IDEAL FOR SUMMER.

By *Cristen Clark*



*Cristen Clark is a pig farmer, creator of the Food & Swine blog, and an award-winning baker and cook. She lives on a farm near Runnells with her husband Mike and children Halle and Barrett (also pictured).*

Classic beef smash burgers are quick, flavorful and built on a simple technique rather than a long list of ingredients. This is one of our favorite family meals in the summer. My son, Barrett, makes his own burger sauce, that adds a nice burst of savory flavor alongside crisp lettuce, tomatoes and onions from our garden.

The heart of a great smash burger is the sear. Start with ground beef that has enough fat to keep it flavorful, ideally an 80/20 blend. Instead of shaping traditional patties, gently form the meat into loose balls. This light touch helps keep the beef's texture nice and tender. Before flipping, you can add a little bit of Barrett's burger sauce to the beef; the mayonnaise in the sauce will enhance browning and add a subtle richness.

Heat a cast-iron skillet or flat griddle until it is nice and hot. Once the beef hits the surface, press it down firmly with a spatula. This step is what creates that signature thin patty with deeply caramelized edges. The goal is maximum contact with the pan, which allows the beef's natural sugars to develop a rich, browned crust.

Resist the urge to move the burger too soon. Let it cook undisturbed for a couple of minutes so the crust can form

properly. When the edges look crisp and browned, flip it once and add a slice of cheese for melted perfection.

The bun plays an important role as well. A soft bun, lightly toasted in butter, adds just the right balance of texture and richness. It should support the burger without overpowering it.

What sets this smashburger apart is Barrett's burger sauce. The combination of mayonnaise, ketchup, a touch of mustard, and finely chopped pickles adds creaminess and a bit of tang. It complements the savory beef and crisp edges without taking over. When you add the sauce under the burger, the mayonnaise helps keep the fresh ingredients from making the bun soggy.

Keep the toppings straightforward, with a garden-inspired influence. Thinly sliced onion, lettuce and tomato all work well. The goal is balance, letting each layer contribute without competing. The richness of Iowa beef plays well with the freshness from the garden.

With the right heat, a simple sauce and a focus on technique, smash burgers deliver big flavor in a short amount of time. It is a dependable, satisfying way to get a great meal on the table. 🌿



### Classic Beef Smash Burgers

Servings: 4 burgers

#### SMASH BURGER PATTIES

- 1 ½ pounds ground beef, 80/20, divided into 8 portions (roughly 3 ounces each)
- Seasoned salt (I use a blend of Lawry's and Cavender's), to taste
- Ground black pepper, to taste
- 4 slices American cheese

#### BARRETT'S BURGER SAUCE

- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- 2 teaspoons mustard
- 2 tablespoons minced bread & butter pickles
- 1 tablespoon pickle brine
- ¼ teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 large pinch of freshly cracked black pepper

#### TOPPINGS

- 4 hamburger buns
- 4-8 large garden lettuce leaves
- 1 large garden tomato, sliced
- ½ red onion, sliced into thin rings
- 12 bread and butter pickle slices

#### PORTION BEEF & PREP TOPPINGS

Divide beef into 8 even portions, about 3 ounces each. Loosely roll portions into balls, then cover and refrigerate while preparing remaining ingredients.

Prepare lettuce, then slice tomatoes and onions.

#### COOK THE PATTIES

Cut four pieces of square parchment paper to use when cooking burger patties.

In a cast-iron skillet or griddle over medium-high heat, place 2-4 burger balls. Working quickly, place a square of parchment

paper over the meat and use a burger press or spatula to firmly smash straight down into a thin patty.

Once the patties are smashed, peel back the parchment paper and discard it, then season the patties with seasoned salt and pepper. Cook for 2-3 minutes and flip with a metal spatula. Cook for another minute. Top half the patties with sliced cheese and cover cheese with the second patty. Repeat with remaining burgers and transfer them to a platter as they finish cooking. Toast buns if desired.

#### ASSEMBLE BURGERS

Place sauce on bottom of bun. Top with sliced pickles, lettuce, tomato and red onion. Add a double patty and top with a bun. Serve immediately.

Photo credit: Devin Benish

# WANDER and discover



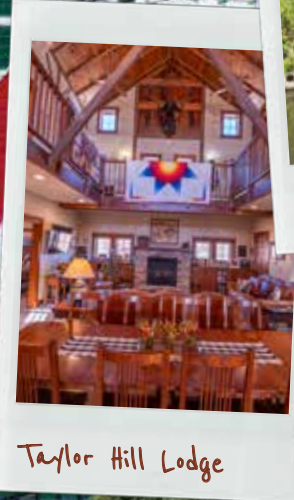
Johnson County



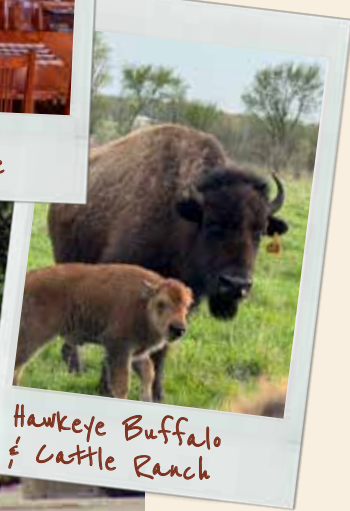
Iowa Falls



Calhoun County



Taylor Hill Lodge



Hawkeye Buffalo & Cattle Ranch



Escape the ordinary and discover agritourism adventures in Iowa.



## Plan Your Rural Iowa Road Trip

Venture off the beaten path and discover a new perspective of America's heartland.

Ready to swap crowded itineraries for open skies and endless memories? In rural Iowa, adventure begins where the highway narrows. Wander into our small towns where stories are shared over coffee; visit family-owned farms where the land feeds generations; and experience firsthand where wholesome food begins its journey. Right here between the rolling hills and cornfields is more than a getaway ... it's something to write home about!

### Travel the Byways

There's no better way to experience Iowa than the open road. The state's scenic byways wind through rolling farmland, river valleys and historic communities, offering a front-row seat to the landscapes and stories that define Iowa. Follow America's first transcontinental road, the iconic Lincoln Highway National Heritage Byway, as it stretches across Iowa.

### Celebrate America's 250th

Experience the heartbeat of America – from meaningful memorials to iconic landmarks,

each one offers a unique way to connect with the stories that shaped our nation.

- 99 County Freedom Rock Tour
- American Gothic House, Eldon
- Bridges of Madison County, Winterset
- Field of Dreams, Dyersville
- Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum, West Branch
- Iowa Veterans Cemetery, Adel

### Enjoy the Views

Pin these locations to take in some of Iowa's best scenery.

- Dunning's Spring Park, Decorah
- Ledges State Park, Madrid
- Loess Hills Scenic Overlook, Moorhead
- Maquoketa Caves State Park, Maquoketa
- Mines of Spain, Dubuque
- Pikes Peak State Park, McGregor
- Whiterock Conservancy, Coon Rapids

### Agritourism Adventures

Connect with local farmers and makers, choose from outdoor adventures, experience country nights and starry skies and discover authentic experiences waiting along our highways and byways. Start planning your next adventure at Evolution of the Heartland: [evolutionoftheheartland.com](http://evolutionoftheheartland.com).

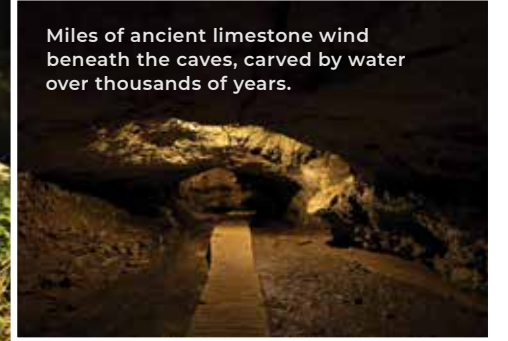
### Get Inspired by Real Explorers

Follow along as these everyday Iowans experience the state they call home. The Iowa explorers are real people sharing honest experiences, practical travel ideas and meaningful moments others can truly relate to. Families taking weekend road trips, couples finding hidden gems, friends exploring small towns and people who genuinely enjoy discovering what rural Iowa has to offer. For more rural Iowa travel inspiration, follow Evolution of the Heartland on social media. 🌿



# UNDERGROUND EXPLORATION AWAITS

Maquoketa Caves State Park has been a public destination since the 1920s, making it one of Iowa's oldest and most-visited natural landmarks.



EMBARK ON A SUBTERRANEAN SUMMER ADVENTURE AT MAQUOKETA CAVES STATE PARK.

By Haley Banwart

**B**eneath the rugged limestone bluffs and wooded acres of eastern Iowa lies a hidden world of expansive caverns and natural wonders waiting to be explored. At Maquoketa Caves State Park, scenic overlooks and above-ground trails give way to cool, winding passageways inviting visitors to venture beyond the surface and discover the beauty carved by nature below.

### A Landscape Carved by Time

Home to more caves than any other Iowa state park, Maquoketa Caves has long stood out as one of the

region's most distinctive outdoor destinations. Visitors have been drawn to the area since the 1860s, when local residents first took an interest in the unusual landscape.

What they discovered was a vast labyrinth of natural chambers and narrow corridors, slowly shaped over thousands of years by underground streams and dripping water that eroded the bedrock. Today, the park spans 192 acres in Jackson County, where hardwood forests brimming with mature oak and maple trees

contrast with striking rock formations and shadowy caverns.

### Iconic Stops Along the Trail

A six-mile trail system connects 13 caves throughout Maquoketa Caves State Park, each offering its own kind of adventure. While families can enjoy exploring expansive chambers that are easily walkable, more experienced spelunkers can navigate smaller caverns with a flashlight and a bit of maneuvering.

One of the park's main attractions is the 1,100-foot Dancehall Cave, the largest and most accessible stop along the trail.

Its cathedral-like space is illuminated by natural skylights, with boardwalk paths guiding visitors through the cavern and lantern-lit sections lighting the way in darker passages.

Other aptly named caves like Fat Man's Misery, Hernando's Hideaway and Shinbone Cave challenge visitors to duck, crawl and squeeze their way through narrow rock crevices. Even on the warmest summer days, the caves offer a cool escape, with consistent temperatures hovering around 50 degrees Fahrenheit, providing a refreshing break from the heat.

Back above ground, visitors can find equally dramatic views and natural features. Highlights include Balanced Rock, a 17-ton formation that appears delicately perched from a distance, and the impressive Natural Bridge, carved from 430-million-year-old dolomite rock standing 50 feet above Raccoon Creek.

### Nature's Playground, Preserved

In a state known for its wide-open skies and fertile fields, Maquoketa Caves offers a different perspective, providing a memorable backdrop for

an afternoon outing or picnic in one of Iowa's oldest state parks.

For those looking to turn a day trip into a weekend getaway, the park features 30 campsites and three youth group camping areas, making it an ideal destination for family vacations, scout outings and summer road trips.

While the caves invite exploration, they also require care. Posted guidelines help protect the fragile formations and the wildlife that call these spaces home — ensuring the experience can be enjoyed for generations to come.

# They Eat Like

# Animals!

*By Gretchen Westdal Centers*

**G**leaning countertops. Kitchen prep tools neatly contained. Menus outlining the various meals to be prepared are posted for quick reference. It's a scene from any culinary environment, but this one has some extremely unique menu items. The daily specials include raw meat, assorted insects and small rodents. Welcome to the Commissary at the Blank Park Zoo.

A commissary team is made up of devoted zoo staff who oversee the preparation, assembly and distribution of meals to the 1,484 animals — that's 104 different species — that call the zoo home. This is no small task, especially with the variety of dietary needs.

#### **Time To Eat**

Feeding nearly 1,500 animals is a substantial undertaking. And ensuring those meals are specifically tailored to each animal's dietary needs adds another element to the commissary team's already full plate.

A commissary keeper's day starts with prepping the kitchen for a full morning of making around 130 diets that are distributed to the animals. The team also fulfills orders to keep the animal care team stocked with their supplies. This includes ordering bags of grain, new brooms, bottles of bleach and other necessities.

The other team members will go to the Quarantine building to care for the new animals that arrive at the zoo. Nearly every animal that comes to the zoo requires a 30-day quarantine to ensure they are healthy and won't transmit any illnesses to the current animal population.

"We feel lucky to be the first ones to meet and care for the new zoo residents and help them transition from their old facility to their new home," relishes Jordan Gibson, commissary and quarantine supervisor at Blank Park Zoo.

**HOW THE BLANK PARK ZOO FEEDS AND NURTURES ITS INHABITANTS.**



Royalty at rest. Deuce, Blank Park Zoo's beloved 15-year-old male lion, soaking up the afternoon.

GIVE AWAY

### WIN A FAMILY MEMBERSHIP TO THE ZOO

Enter to win a one-year family membership to the Blank Park Zoo, Iowa's wildest adventure, at [iowafoodandfamily.com/contest/zoo-membership](http://iowafoodandfamily.com/contest/zoo-membership).

In preparing the meals, the team goes through pounds of fresh greens, fruits and vegetables, including corn, apples, berries, sweet potatoes, carrots and squash, just to name a few. Some animals get hard-boiled eggs. Pinnipeds and penguins enjoy a diet of fish. And the big cats and birds of prey go through a lot of beef products, including chunk meat, liver, heart and even bones.

"We go through roughly 20,000 pounds of fish, 14,000 pounds of meat and estimate that we go through around 100,000 pounds of produce each year," illustrates Gibson. "We use a wide variety of fresh produce, both locally sourced and even from our own garden, which we have onsite!"

That sustainability extends to other areas. Gibson goes on to say that when purchasing food items, the team is always looking for trusted companies that source sustainably.

"The majority of our produce is from Loffredo and Fareway, which are both known for sourcing quality products locally within Iowa and the Midwest," says Gibson. "During the summer months, we grow corn, squash, tomatoes and cucumbers in our garden, and



Dr. Drew Gall, cares for over 100 species of animals at Blank Park Zoo, the only accredited zoo in the state.



As obligate carnivores, lions and tigers require meat-based diets tailored to their species, age and health.

our apple trees produce so much that last year we ended up donating crates of apples since we couldn't use them all. We also have a large compost pile on-site that we use for any food scraps that are not edible or can't be fed out to the animals, which then gets used to support our beautiful zoo gardens."

It is this whole focus on the animals, their well-being, and a broader focus on conservation and preservation that keeps the commissary team busy seven days a week. They work in tandem with the veterinary staff and animal care teams to keep everything running as a happy ecosystem.

#### A Meaningful Meal Plan

"Just like in humans, nutrition plays such a huge role in overall animal wellness. The quality is critical to their overall well-being throughout their life," explains Dr. Drew Gall, DVM, senior veterinarian at the Blank Park Zoo. "We do a lot of diet analysis, specifically looking at their GI tract and how it functions, what's the microbiome and how does that transition to an appropriate, balanced diet."

Dr. Gall, who graduated from Iowa State University and has been with the zoo for a decade, goes on to explain how the commissary team's work is a critical component of animal welfare, and that the nutrition informs much of the zoo's veterinary team's work.

Take the Eastern Black Rhinos that live at the zoo. They are a critically endangered species with fewer than 1,000 left in the wild and captive populations. Ensuring they have the right



From fruits and veggies to raw meat, every bite is carefully planned and prepared for over 800 animals.

diet is essential to their survival and future. Eastern Black Rhinos live on a diet of leafy plants, twigs, legumes, fruit and grass. Part of that diet at the zoo incorporates hay.

"One of the things Black rhinos are extremely well known for, at least on the medical side, is they have iron overload disorder," explains Dr. Gall. "If they consume too much iron in their diet, it can affect how their

liver functions, and inadvertently cause liver damage. We must be extremely tedious on evaluating their diets for levels of iron. We have been trying to find this upcoming year's hay allotment with low iron."

**"We have really high standards in every aspect around the zoo."**

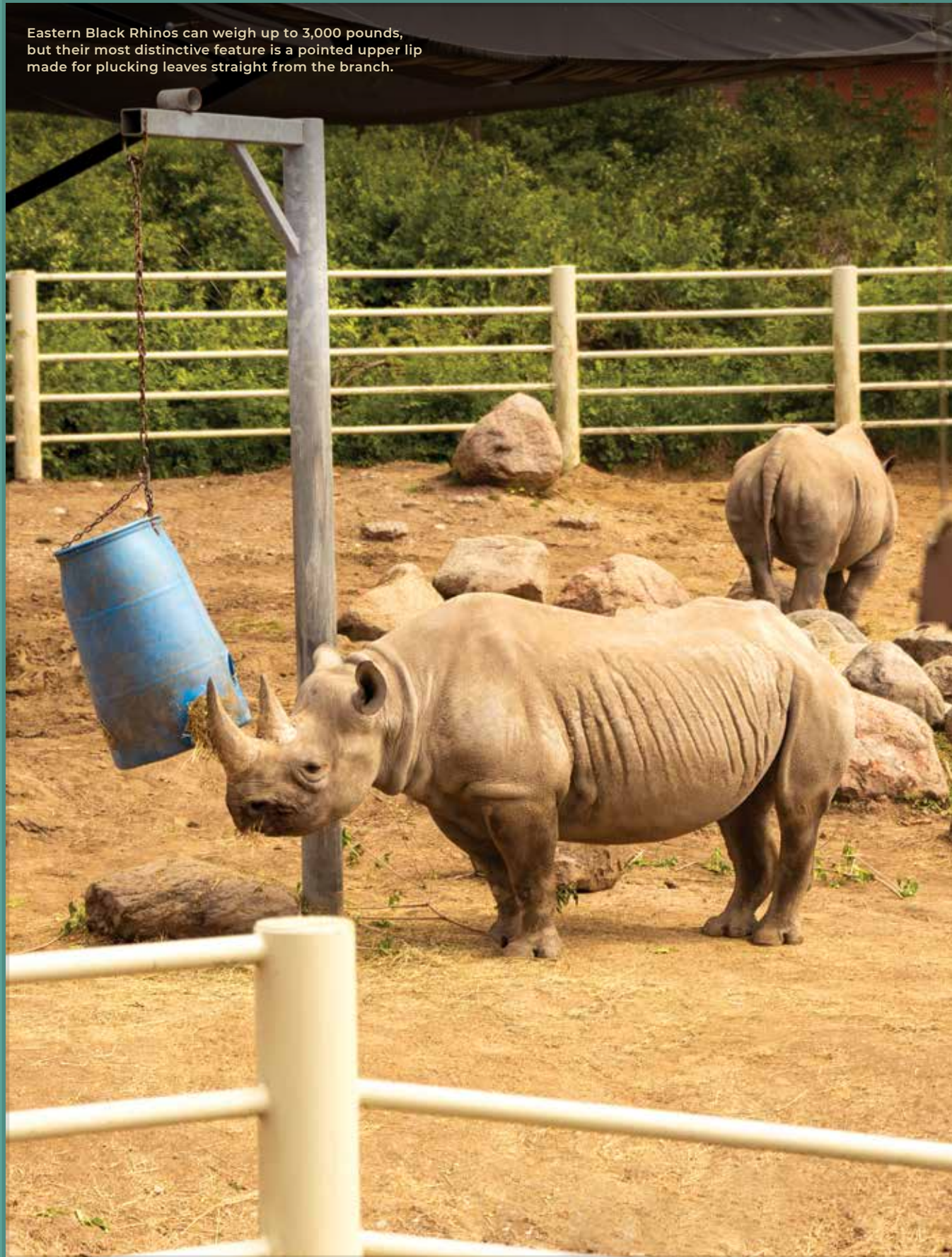
**Dr. Drew Gall, DVM**

#### Data-Informed Decision-Making

Dr. Gall and his team can make these adjustments due to the wealth of data and knowledge sharing that happens between zoos in the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA). Similar to associations within agriculture and animal husbandry, the AZA works to support zoos and their staff so animal welfare is championed.

Through the AZA, Blank Park Zoo was able to work with Disney's Animal Kingdom on a three-year study to examine the rhino's diet and gain crucial insights into how they can best support the

Eastern Black Rhinos can weigh up to 3,000 pounds, but their most distinctive feature is a pointed upper lip made for plucking leaves straight from the branch.



species through nutrition. Now they know that the rhinos need regular monitoring through blood and stool samples to ensure their iron levels are in check.

“A lot of what we do focuses on what we know about the animal’s diets,” Dr. Gall clarifies.

He goes on to explain how this relatively new wealth of data informs much of the care plans created for the animals. It is a welcome development especially as so much of their work is in conservation and the breeding programs.

#### **Protecting The Herd**

2026 marks the zoo’s 60th anniversary and the celebrations are felt throughout the 49 acres the zoo occupies on the south side of Des Moines. Throughout the years, there have been numerous advancements in animal welfare, conservation practices, educational opportunities and — one of the most critical — biosecurity. Like the practices seen on a farm, biosecurity is one of the most important aspects of the zoo’s continued advancements.

“Biosecurity always starts with the individual animal,” Dr. Gall explains. “We have really high standards in every aspect around the zoo. Biosecurity heightens every level of decision-making.”

This is especially important when the zoo gets a new animal. Species are often transferred between accredited AZA institutions.

Once an animal arrives, it enters a quarantine process tailored to its species, health status and behavioral needs. In some cases, animals are housed in designated quarantine spaces, while others may remain in specialized barn areas, depending on what is safest and least stressful for each animal.

Beyond animal transfers, the zoo maintains strict daily biosecurity protocols throughout the facility. These include disinfection procedures, foot baths, dedicated cleaning tools for different animal areas, and careful oversight of food sourcing and nutrition.

#### **For The Future**

“Every aspect of the zoo goes back to the animals,” Dr. Gall says proudly. That is evident when visitors walk the grounds. Signage and educational opportunities remind visitors that these animals are here for a greater purpose and that, to look forward to the future, we must care for the now. 🌱

“  
We go  
through  
roughly  
20,000  
pounds of  
fish, 14,000  
pounds of  
meat and  
around  
100,000  
pounds of  
produce  
each year.”

**Jordan Gibson**



# PASSING IT ON

## A FARM TRANSITION ROOTED IN TRUST AND TIMING

By Kriss Nelson

For Roger Van Ersvelde, the decision to bring a younger farmer into his operation was both personal and practical.

He and his late wife, Louise, made the decision together, knowing that without children to carry on the farm, the future of their operation could not be left to chance. They wanted to create an opportunity for someone else, much like the one he had been given years earlier.

“I was given the opportunity to farm by my parents,” he says. “We wanted to give somebody else that same chance.”

That opportunity found its way to Cole Olson.

Olson, now 30, first connected with Van Ersvelde as a high school student looking for work. What started with mowing and helping around the farm gradually grew into something more. Over time, the two built a trust and eventually developed a plan to transition the farm.

### Building Trust

Today, that plan is well underway.

The pair began by sharing responsibilities on rented ground, gradually increasing Olson’s role. By the end of 2026, Olson will be farming all of Van Ersvelde’s owned acres in a 50-50 arrangement.

Roger Van Ersvelde and Cole Olson emerge from Roger’s farm shop, ready to take on a shared future.



The next step comes in 2027, when Van Ersvelde plans to sell Olson and his wife, Kayla, a parcel of land, giving their family, including daughters Hattie and Sadie, their first owned acres and a place to build their future.

For Van Ersvelde, the approach is deliberate.

“I’m not giving it to him. You’ve got to earn it,” he says. “But you also don’t want to bury someone in debt so deep they can’t see the end.”

That mindset is shaped by more than five decades in agriculture.

Van Ersvelde started farming in 1970 after returning from the Air Force, buying his father’s machinery for \$10,000. He later navigated the farm crisis of the 1980s, making difficult financial decisions that still influence how he thinks about risk and opportunity today.

Instead of passing along expensive machinery, he sees land as a more stable foundation for the next generation.

“Machinery loses value,” he says. “Land gives them something to build on.”

### Learning Curve

For Olson, the transition has been about more than ownership. It has been about learning from experience.

“Roger has taught me so much,” Olson says. “That experience is something you can’t replace.”

Unlike many farmers, Olson did not grow up on a large operation. His interest in agriculture came from friends and neighbors, eventually leading him to study agricultural systems technology at Iowa State University.

Even then, farming was not a certainty.





Cole Olson and Roger Van Ersvelde work on the planter and talk through business decisions together.

### THEIR PARTNERSHIP BLENDS EXPERIENCE WITH A WILLINGNESS TO ADAPT.



He also sees value in keeping farms at a scale that allows new farmers to get started, rather than consolidating into ever-larger operations.


“If we don’t bring younger people into agriculture, we’re going to be all old,” Van Ersvelde says.

#### Why It Matters

For consumers, the impact of that trend reaches far beyond the farm.

Every meal, every tank of renewable fuel and countless everyday products begin with agriculture. Ensuring there are farmers ready to take the next step is essential in continuing to feed, fuel and clothe the population.

For Van Ersvelde, the goal is simple. Leave the farm better than he found it, both in the land and in the hands it passes to next.

For Olson, it is the chance to build something of his own while carrying that legacy forward. 



Roger Van Ersvelde, farmer, mentor and believer in the next generation of Iowa agriculture.

#### Making It Work

Still, the path into farming has not been easy.

Olson spent years balancing off-farm jobs with growing responsibilities on the operation. Even today, he takes on additional work to support the farm and his family.

“As a young farmer, you’re subsidizing your habit a little bit,” he says. “You’ve got to be willing to put in the hours elsewhere if you want to make it work.”

That reality is part of a larger challenge facing agriculture. As the average age of farmers continues to rise and fewer young people are entering the profession, making transitions like this one increasingly important.

Van Ersvelde believes part of the solution is looking beyond traditional paths.

“They don’t have to come from a big farm,” he says. “Sometimes the best ones are the ones who really want it.”

After college, Olson considered moving away for work. A simple conversation changed his path.

“I asked him what his plan was,” Olson says. “All he said was, ‘You might want to stick around.’”

That was enough to keep him rooted.

Their partnership blends experience with a willingness to adapt. While Van Ersvelde brings decades of knowledge, Olson contributes a comfort with newer technology, helping manage equipment systems and data that continue to evolve in modern farming.

“It’s a lot of small things that make a big difference,” Van Ersvelde says, pointing to Olson’s ability to problem-solve and take initiative. In one early example, Olson fixed a broken mower on his own while Van Ersvelde was away, a small moment that reinforced his confidence.



Cole Olson, farmer and Iowa State University graduate, building his future one acre at a time.





FOCUSED ON.



# FIBER

GETTING ENOUGH FIBER HAS SOME SURPRISING RESULTS.

By Gretchen Westdal Centers

If you go on the internet, are current on medical news, or talk to anyone in the fitness or nutrition space, you'll quickly hear about fiber. It's a buzzy topic, and perspectives vary depending on where you get your information.

To cut through the noise, we talked with Jody Gatewood, a registered dietitian with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, and Anne Cundiff, a registered dietitian with Hy-Vee, to help you get the facts and provide you with easy, practical ways to increase fiber in your diet.

### What is fiber, and what does fiber actually do in the body?

**Cundiff:** Fiber is a carbohydrate found in a variety of foods, mostly fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Because

it's a carbohydrate, digestion begins in the mouth.

I often describe it as acting almost like a glue or a scrub brush. As fiber moves through the digestive tract, it can bind to substances such as excess fat, excess sugar and environmental exposures and toxins. It helps remove those substances from the body as part of the normal digestive process.

**Gatewood:** There are two main types of fiber: soluble and insoluble.

Soluble fiber dissolves in water and forms a gel-like substance in the stomach. That gel slows digestion, which helps regulate blood sugar levels and can help lower cholesterol. Soluble fiber is found in foods like oats, peas, beans, fruits, vegetables, apples, bananas and avocados.



### WIN A \$150 HY-VEE GIFT CARD

Enter to win a \$150 Hy-Vee gift card to purchase fiber-rich foods at [iowafoodandfamily.com/contest/fiber](http://iowafoodandfamily.com/contest/fiber).

## Greek Pasta Salad

- 3 ounces small farfalle (bowtie) pasta — Banza Chickpea bowtie pasta is a great fiber choice
  - 1 can of Hy-Vee Garbanzo Beans, drained and rinsed
  - 1 can (13.75 ounces) artichoke hearts, drained, rinsed and quartered
  - 1 small zucchini or cucumber, seeds removed and chopped
  - 1 ½ cup of frozen edamame, thawed
  - ½ cup chopped red onion
  - 1 pint of cherry tomatoes, halved
  - ¼ cup fresh lemon juice
  - 3 tablespoons Hy-Vee Select olive oil
  - ¾ teaspoon Italian seasoning
  - 3 tablespoons crumbled feta cheese
  - Salt and Pepper
- Cook pasta al dente according to package directions, drain. Rinse with cold water; drain again.**
- In a large bowl combine pasta, beans, artichoke hearts, zucchini, edamame, onion and tomatoes. Set aside.**
- In a small bowl, whisk together lemon juice, oil, Italian seasoning and salt and pepper to taste.**
- Drizzle over pasta salad in bowl; toss to coat. Sprinkle with feta, and serve.**



“SOY PRODUCTS LIKE TOFU AND ROASTED EDAMAME ARE GREAT BECAUSE THEY PROVIDE BOTH FIBER AND PROTEIN.”

ANNE CUNDIFF



A fresh Greek pasta salad packed with fiber-rich ingredients like chickpea pasta, edamame, artichoke hearts and garbanzo beans.



Insoluble fiber works a little differently. It doesn't dissolve in water; instead, it helps move food through the digestive system by adding bulk to stool. That's the type of fiber that helps keep things moving and can prevent constipation. Insoluble fiber is found in foods like whole grains, beans and vegetables, such as cauliflower.

Both types are important, so eating a variety of fiber-rich foods helps support overall digestion and health.

### What is the recommended daily amount of fiber for adults in the U.S.?

**Gatewood:** The average American gets only about 10 to 12 grams of fiber per day, which is well below the recommended amount.

**Cundiff:** Ideally, I like to see:

- Women: about 25 to 30 grams per day
- Men: about 35 to 38 grams per day

Men generally need a bit more because they tend to have a slightly longer digestive tract. Overall, most of us should be getting roughly twice the fiber we currently consume.

### What's the biggest misconception about fiber that you see?

**Cundiff:** The biggest misconception is that more is always better. Right now, there's a trend called "fibermaxing,"

where people try to pack in as much fiber as possible through supplements, powders, drinks, gummies and fiber bars. While those products can have a place, people often jump straight to supplements instead of starting with whole foods.

**Gatewood:** Whole foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes should always come first. Supplements can help fill gaps, but they shouldn't replace real food.

### What's your favorite way to help people add more fiber through whole foods?

**Cundiff:** When I work with people, I start by asking a simple question: "What fruits and vegetables do you actually like?" People often think healthy eating means forcing themselves to eat foods they dislike. But even if someone only enjoys two or three fruits or vegetables, that's a great starting point.

I talk about "always foods" — foods you enjoy enough to eat regularly. If someone loves bananas, grapes and oranges, those become their go-to fruits. If their favorite vegetable is canned green beans or a simple lettuce salad, that's fine. The key is consistency with foods people genuinely enjoy.

### With grocery prices rising, what are some cost-effective ways to eat more fiber?

**Gatewood:** Fresh, frozen, canned and dried fruits and vegetables can

all be good options. Frozen produce is especially helpful because it lasts longer and still retains its nutritional value.

Eating produce that's in season can also help reduce costs. As the weather warms and more produce becomes available, prices often drop.

Another option is growing some produce at home. Container gardening on a balcony or deck is a cost-effective, easy option.

Affordable fiber sources also include foods like oatmeal, brown rice and beans. Beans can even help stretch meals — for example, adding black beans or refried beans to taco meat can increase fiber and make the meal go further.

### What role can low-grown foods like soy play in a fiber-rich diet?

**Cundiff:** Soy products like tofu and roasted edamame are great because they provide both fiber and protein. Through our taste and sampling classes, we're helping people explore soy-based foods and see how they can fit into everyday meals.

Roasted edamame is one of my personal favorites — it adds a nice crunch to salads and serves as a crouton substitute while boosting fiber and protein. 🌱

"TWO MAIN TYPES OF FIBER: SOLUBLE AND INSOLUBLE  
INSOLUBLE FIBER IS FOUND  
IN FOODS LIKE WHOLE GRAINS,  
BEANS AND VEGETABLES,  
SUCH AS CAULIFLOWER."

JODY GATEWOOD



## Stuffed Peppers

- ½ pound ground Italian sausage, turkey sausage or beef
- 1 onion, chopped (about 1 cup)
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano leaves
- 1 can (15 ounces) spaghetti sauce
- 3 cups cooked brown rice
- 1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese (divided)
- 4 green or red peppers (softball-sized)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.

Sauté sausage and onion in a large skillet over medium heat until browned and cooked to 155 degrees F. Pour off any fat.

Stir in oregano, spaghetti sauce, rice and ½ cup cheese.

Wash peppers, cut in half lengthwise and remove seeds. Arrange in a 9 x 13-inch baking dish.

Spoon sausage mixture into the peppers, mounding on the top.

Cover with foil. Bake for 30 minutes. Remove the foil and sprinkle remaining ½ cup cheese on top. Continue to cook another 10 minutes.

*This recipe is provided by Iowa State University's Spend Smart. Eat Smart. — Registered Trademark.*



Fiber-packed stuffed peppers loaded with Italian sausage, brown rice and mozzarella cheese is a hearty meal that checks all the boxes.

By April Pearson

# farm family folklore

READ ABOUT MOECKLY FARMS' STORIED PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

**M**oeckly Farms in Polk County has eight generations' worth of fascinating farm family history. From accidentally starting a silage business to raising cattle rescued during World War II to somehow ending up with a baseball field in the middle of their cornfield — some stories you must read to believe.

### **The Original Plot**

The Moeckly Farms story began in the late 1840s, when Konrad Möckli and his son Johannes immigrated to the U.S. from Switzerland. They braved their first Iowa winter

in a covered wagon, bought a plot of land in 1854 and built a beautiful red barn in 1876 that still stands today. Johannes and his wife went on to have six kids, “and every generation’s farmed non-stop since then,” says Tyler Moeckly, who works alongside his wife Anna, parents Paula and Steve, and kids Jon, Jacob and Nick.

The Moecklys grow commercial corn and soybeans, as well as seed corn and soybeans. While it’s more work creating a higher-yielding hybrid seed, it’s worth it. “Instead of farming more acres, you can get more

The Moeckly family has been farming on the same land in Polk County for 172 years. Below are Jacob, Nick, Paula, Steve, Tyler, Anna and Jon Moeckly.





Steve Moeckly says his cattle are his pride and joy.



The distinctive black and white markings of British White Park cattle make them one of the rarest and most recognizable breeds in the world.

**BRITISH WHITE PARK CATTLE ARE KNOWN FOR BEAUTIFUL MARKINGS, EXCELLENT FLAVOR, GOOD MARBLING AND EASE OF CALVING.**

revenue per acre producing seed — so we kind of like that,” says Tyler.

They also have a custom silage operation, which they didn’t exactly set out to do. “In the beginning, we just did it for our own cattle, but then we got a better forage harvester, and soon we were harvesting forage for 20 different places,” says Tyler. “It kind of started a business that we didn’t really intend to start, but we’re still doing it!”

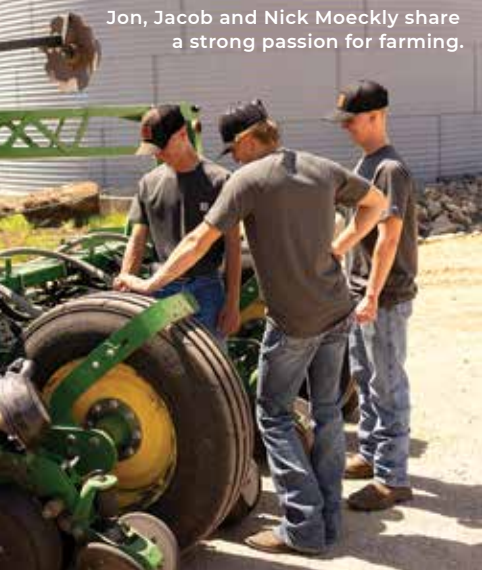
Their harvester can process 80 acres per day, creating corn silage “confetti” that then passes through a roller mill to make it more palatable. The crushed forage sits in a bunker silo to ferment for months, allowing the anaerobic bacteria to convert the sugars into protein. The process is efficient, the feed is nutritious, and the cattle love it. Tyler says, “In the winter, the silage is still warm and moist from going through the fermentation process. The steam just rolls off it. So, it’s kind of nice for the cattle to eat on a cold day.”

**A Cow Tale**

During WWII, Winston Churchill gave the order to burn all crops and slaughter all cattle in England if Germany invaded. To prevent the extinction of rare British White Park cattle, a small herd was shipped from Britain to the U.S. as a precautionary measure. Originally sent to the Bronx Zoo in New York City, the cattle were eventually moved to King Ranch in Texas, where they remained as a closed herd for 40 years.

“In 1981, King Ranch was running out of room, so they invited my mom and dad to go down there, take a look and buy some cattle if they wanted to,” says Steve. They did want to. In fact, Marilyn and John Moeckly bought the entire herd of British White Park cattle and brought it up to Iowa. “We started breeding them for the purebred market. And, we started selling cattle all over the continent.”

A few years later, Marilyn went to Scotland and bought a purebred White Park bull to introduce a new bloodline into British White Park cattle that had been inbred for four decades. It had to be



Jon, Jacob and Nick Moeckly share a strong passion for farming.

quarantined for six months before joining the herd in 1984, but was it worth the wait? “We finally got the Scottish bull home and used him for a couple of years, but we found out that the original herd’s genetics were better than the new bull’s offspring,” says Steve. So, the Moecklys sold the Scottish White Park bull and its offspring to The Nature Conservancy.

They also sold some of their British White Park cattle to Seed Savers Exchange in 1988, but for a different reason. In the 1980s, the breed was considered “critically endangered.” Seed Savers — a nonprofit dedicated to preserving America’s culturally diverse food legacy — bought the cattle to protect them for future generations.

British White Park cattle are known for beautiful markings, excellent flavor, good marbling and ease of calving. “The most important thing about them is that they’re good mothers,” says Steve. “Back in the old days, in England, they ran wild. So, they have this wild instinct to survive. You want to get out of their way when they have a calf, because she can take care of it better than anyone else. And she wants you to know that.”

In its peak cattle-producing days, Moeckly Farms had more than



Custom silage “confetti,” fermented for months and loved by the herd, is a cornerstone of the Moeckly Farms feeding operation.

**GOING ON NINE GENERATIONS,  
MOECKLY FARMS IS STILL GROWING  
— CORN, SOYBEANS, CATTLE AND  
STORIES WORTH TELLING.**

100 head of purebred White Park cattle and was known as “The Iowa Home of Registered White Park Cattle.” Though they’ve pivoted and diversified over the years, the Moecklys still raise White Park cattle as part of their calf-cow operation.

**A Wild Pitch**

In 2021, an opportunity for the Moecklys came out of left field. “We got a note on the front door that a location scout had been there, looking at our property for a project. So, I gave her a call,” says Anna. “She said, ‘Hey, I’m going to bring two guys out to your farm. I think it’s perfect for what we’re looking for.’ I rolled up to our meeting, having no clue what was going on, and I realized that Mike Schur and Morgan Sackett were standing at our house, looking at our field.”

Schur and Sackett are big hitters in Hollywood, having collaborated on “Parks and Rec,” “The Good Place” and “Man on the Inside.” And they wanted to put a baseball field in the Moeckly’s corn field for a “Field of Dreams” revamp.

They pitched the idea to Anna, and the family loved it. Once things got moving, they moved fast. “They started production of the field-dirt work right away,” says Anna. “It was a really neat process. We dedicated three acres of crop ground, so it’s the size of a major league baseball



A “Field of Dreams” view, but in Polk County.

Photo courtesy of Moeckly Farms

**“I THINK OUR  
KEY TO SUCCESS  
IS RESPECT  
FOR AND LOVE  
OF ONE ANOTHER,  
AND KNOWING  
THAT WE NEED  
TO HONOR  
OUR PAST.”**

field. It has state-of-the-art lights from Musco Lighting. They didn’t really spare any expense.”

And then, as quickly as it started, it stopped. Production halted due to economic conditions in post-COVID Los Angeles, and even though Anna’s still in contact with the production team, it’s uncertain whether the project will ever happen. “Hopefully there’s a show in the future, but if not, we don’t have

any regrets. I think it’s been a neat part of our story to tell.”

For now, the Moecklys are using the baseball field for community family fun nights, yoga in the ballpark, baseball practice for local teams and other events. “It really is magical,” says Anna. “It’s an unparalleled experience when you’re out there in the summer, and the corn’s 10 feet tall, and the lights are on, and it’s just, wow, it’s breathtaking.”

**The Story Continues**

Going on nine generations, Moeckly Farms is still growing — corn, soybeans, cattle and stories worth telling. Anna finds it especially heartwarming to have three generations working the same ground their family did nearly 200 years ago. She says, “I think our key to success is respect for and love of one another, and knowing that we need to honor our past.” 🌿



Tyler and Anna Moeckly on the farm near Polk City.

**IOWA’S BEST BURGERS**

Arcadia, a restaurant in Polk City, offers a smash burger with cheese, caramelized onions, pickles, signature Arcadia sauce — and delicious, fresh beef from Moeckly Farms.

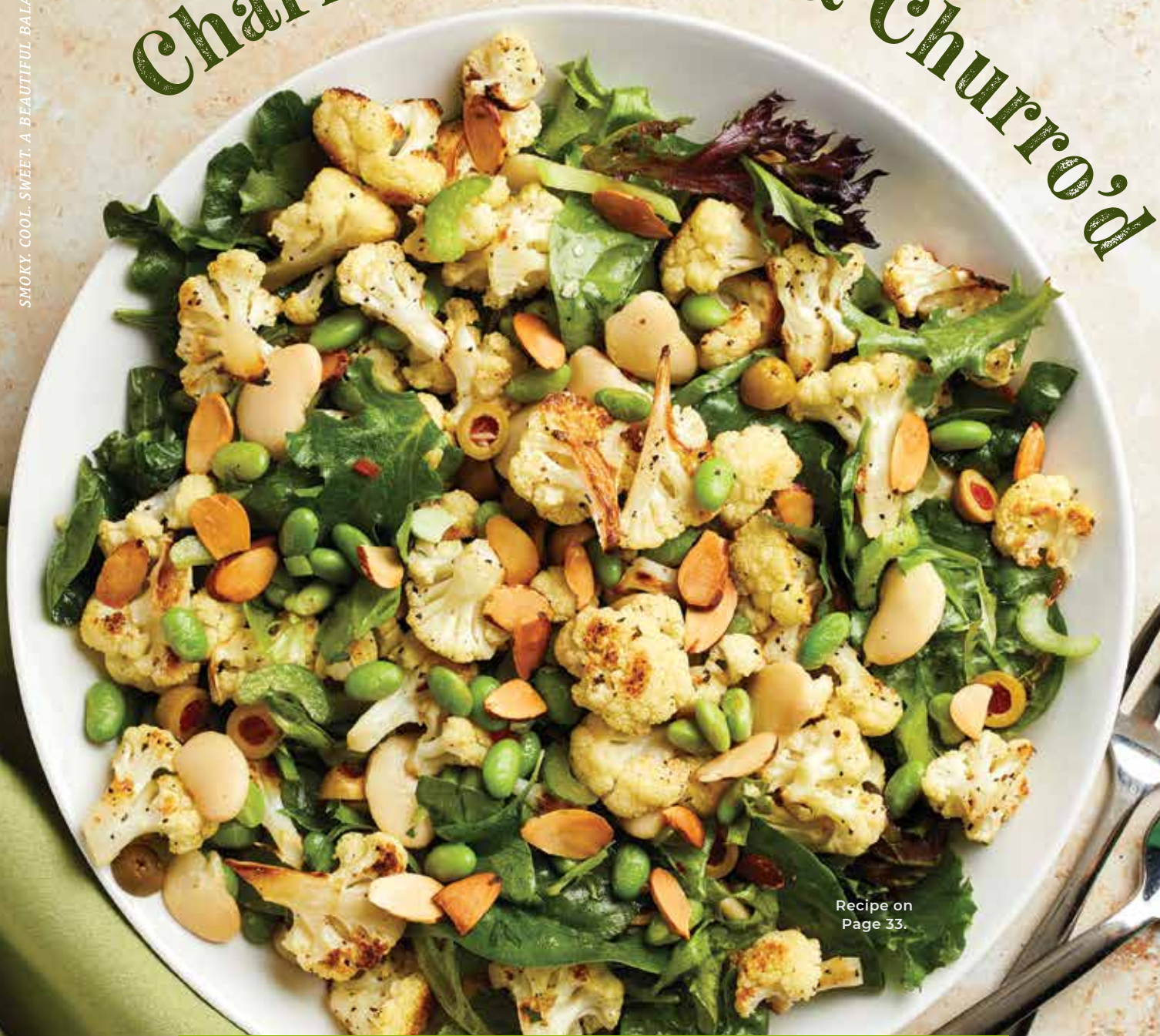
“Our friends at Arcadia wanted to invest locally and source quality ingredients closer to home,” says Anna. “They needed beef, and it just so happened that we had beef, so we decided to partner up.”

The partnership paid off. Arcadia won the Des Moines Register’s 2026 Burger Bracket and was a top-10 finalist for the Iowa Beef Industry Council’s Best Burger in Iowa for the second year in a row.

Photo courtesy of Iowa Beef Industry Council



# Charred, Chilled & Churros



Recipe on Page 33.

By Lydia Zerby

Fire up the grill, then cool things down — this menu is all about bold contrasts and big flavor, bringing together smoky, caramelized bites with crisp, refreshing sides and a sweet finish that steals the show. We're leaning into the magic of high heat with roasted cauliflower that's deeply golden and packed with flavor, plus street corn pork chops that taste like summer on a plate. The Peruvian beef kabobs bring a vibrant, savory punch, while a chilled edamame and butter bean salad balances it all with freshness and texture. And just when you think it can't get better, a creamy churro milkshake swoops in — cinnamon-sugar bliss in a glass. It's a lineup made for backyard gatherings, easy entertaining or any night you want to turn up the flavor. Smoky, cool and just a little indulgent — this is summer.

## Roasted Cauliflower, Butter Bean and Edamame Salad

### SALAD

- 1 medium cauliflower, cut into 2-inch florets (about 7 cups)
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- 4 cups of your favorite greens
- 1 can (15 ounces) butter beans, drained and rinsed
- ½ cup thinly sliced celery
- ½ cup pitted green olives (about 10), sliced in half
- ¾ cup edamame, shelled, cooked according to package directions
- 2 to 3 tablespoons toasted sliced almonds
- Basil leaves

### DRESSING

- 4 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh basil leaves
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon honey
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- Kosher salt and black pepper to taste

Arrange a rack in the middle of the oven and heat the oven to 425 degrees F. Line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper and set aside.

For the salad, place cauliflower florets in a large bowl. Drizzle oil over florets and gently toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper. Transfer to the prepared baking sheet. Bake, turning halfway through, until golden and tender, 20 to 24 minutes.

While the cauliflower is roasting and before assembling the salad, prepare the dressing. Place the olive oil, lemon juice, basil, Dijon mustard, honey and garlic in a Mason jar with a tight-fitting lid. Shake to

combine. Adjust flavor with salt and pepper.

To assemble the salad, arrange the greens, beans, celery and olives in a large, shallow bowl. Pour half the dressing over the mixture and toss gently to combine. Top with the cooked cauliflower and edamame; add remaining dressing. Toss to combine. Top with sliced almonds and garnish with basil.

**Serves 4–6, Total yield: 9 cups**

*Photo and recipe credit: The Soyfoods Council*



## Street Corn Pork Chops

- 6 (1-inch thick) boneless pork chops

### STREET CORN TOPPING

- 4 cobs corn, husked
- 1 tablespoon mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon sour cream
- 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon smoked paprika
- ¼ cup chopped cilantro
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped red onion
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped jalapeno
- ¼ cup cotija (or feta) cheese

### PORK CHOP SEASONING

- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- ½ teaspoon oregano
- ½ teaspoon chili powder
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon black pepper

Preheat the grill to medium-high heat.

Place the cobs of corn directly on the grill plates to give them a little char. Rotate about every 1–2

minutes or until golden brown on all sides. Remove from the grill and cut the corn off the cobs and let cool.

In a small bowl, combine the remaining street corn salad ingredients. Stir in the corn and set aside until the pork chops are ready.

In a small bowl, combine the pork chop seasoning ingredients and stir until combined.

Sprinkle the mixture onto the pork chops, making sure to coat both sides.

Place the pork chops on the grill and let cook for 4–5 minutes.

Flip the pork chops 5–7 minutes, or until the internal temperature reaches 145 degrees F.

Remove the pork chops from the grill and let rest for 5 minutes. Serve each pork chop with a large spoonful of the street corn salad and additional cheese, if desired.

**Servings: 6**

*Photo and recipe credit: Iowa Pork Producers Association*

## Peruvian Steak Kabobs

- 2 pounds beef Inside Skirt Steak, pounded  $\frac{1}{8}$  to  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch thick
- 1 zucchini, thinly sliced lengthwise
- 1 yellow squash, thinly sliced lengthwise

### SAUCE AND MARINADE

- 4 limes, juiced
- 1 cup canola oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup red wine vinegar
- 1 small Spanish onion, peeled and quartered
- 1 tablespoon garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1 tablespoon salt
- $1\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons ground black pepper
- $1\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons dried oregano leaves
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon ground chiles de arbol

### COWBOY STEAK AND ROAST RUB

- 1 teaspoon sweet paprika
- $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon dried thyme leaves
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon garlic powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon onion powder
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon salt (optional)
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon pepper

In a food processor or blender container, combine lime juice, oil, vinegar, onion, garlic, paprika, salt, pepper, oregano and ground chiles de arbol. Blend together until smooth; set aside.

Add half of marinade in a food-safe plastic bag. Add beef, zucchini and squash. Close bag securely and marinate in refrigerator 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Alternate threading beef and vegetables onto metal skewers. Sprinkle with steak and roast seasoning.

Place kabobs on grill over medium, ash-covered coals. Grill, 9 to 12 minutes (over medium heat on preheated gas grill, 8 to 10 minutes) for medium rare (145 degrees F) to medium (160 degrees F) doneness, turning once. Remove from grill.

Serve kabobs drizzled with remaining reserved sauce.

Servings: 8

*Photo and recipe credit: Beef. It's What's For Dinner.*



### cook's tip

If using wooden skewers, soak in water 10 minutes to prevent burning on the grill.

## Caramel Churro Milkshake

- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup milk
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon cinnamon
- 3 scoops vanilla bean ice cream
- Whipped cream
- Caramel sauce, optional
- Cinnamon sugar twists

Blend milk, brown sugar and cinnamon until combined. Add the ice cream and blend again.

Pour into a chilled glass. Top with whipped cream, caramel and crushed cinnamon sugar twists.

Servings: 2

*Photo and recipe credit: usdairy.com*





Photo courtesy of t a s t e .



Photo courtesy of Christopher Maharry Photography

*building a culinary empire, one local ingredient at a time*



Photo courtesy of Christopher Maharry Photography



Photo courtesy of Kaitlie Blake

**AN IOWA CHEF'S JOURNEY TO BUILDING RESTAURANTS  
ROOTED IN LOCAL FLAVOR AND COMMUNITY.**

*By Anna Toot*

**A**s dining trends come and go, some stand the test of time — frozen yogurt, fondue and avocado toast — while others falter. Farm-to-table is a concept that many restaurateurs popularized in the early 2010s. Many Iowans and Iowa chefs just know this to be the norm. Especially Chef Jessica Baldus, or Chef Jes for short.

Farm-to-table focuses on serving fresh food made from locally sourced ingredients and pairing it with a unique dining experience. Chefs encourage diners to slow down and gain a deeper appreciation for the food producers and farmers in their communities. Menus change seasonally, based on which ingredients are fresh and available, to ensure peak flavor and nutritional value is appreciated.

It's also what made Baldus an Iowa culinary star, earning appearances on "Supermarket Stakeout" and "Guy's Grocery Games" on Food Network, a spot on the Iowa Restaurant Association's 40 Women to Watch list in 2020, Top Honors at the Iowa Pork Producers' 38th and final Taste event, a James Beard award nomination and many more.

**A Portfolio with Purpose**

Baldus wears many hats: chef, entrepreneur, restaurateur and mentor, but her journey to becoming a business owner began in 2008 with the opening of a cheesecake shop in Des Moines. This shop eventually expanded into something much bigger: five independent businesses, operating in tandem, each making waves in their specific culinary niche.

The cheesecake shop expanded into the Bakery, Baldus' concept that offers custom cakes, desserts and pastries, available by custom order.

At Taste in Osage, stylized as t a s t e ., diners can experience Baldus' now-famous chef's table meals, available by appointment only. Housed beneath the restaurant is The Blind Pig, a members-only speakeasy designed to evoke the authenticity of the Prohibition era.

Beyond the dining experience, Baldus has expanded the brand through Piggyback Smoke Shack, a barbecue concept operating as a "ghost kitchen" that serves Osage and the surrounding area through catering, events, pop-ups and online ordering. The business also includes the Market, a storefront offering locally sourced produce, herbs and meats, though its future has evolved from the original vision.

"The Market started as a sister concept to my t a s t e . culinary concept. I wanted to create a retail space where customers could buy some of the locally sourced products they may have tried during their dinners at t a s t e ., including specialty meats, herbs and produce that they can't find at the grocery store."

Baldus is planning to close the Market this year, not because it wasn't successful, but because it achieved exactly what she wanted it to: connecting customers and Iowa food producers. Most of her customers now buy products directly from the producers.

"The Market never brought a profit. It was always a passion project. It was about connecting our



**WIN A PRAIRIE BREEZE CHEESE MULTI-PACK**

Enter to win a Prairie Breeze Cheese multi-pack, perfect for snacking or creating Chef Jes's delicious cake (*recipe on Page 40*), at [iowafoodandfamily.com/contest/chef-jes](http://iowafoodandfamily.com/contest/chef-jes).

# Iowa

Jessica Baldus



Photo courtesy of Kathie Blake

culinary star

chef

“IN THIS BUSINESS, YOU MUST BE VERY RESOURCEFUL. I KNOW WHAT I DO ISN’T FOR EVERYBODY. I HAVE A GO-WITH-THE-FLOW PERSONALITY AND AM ALWAYS WILLING TO ADJUST MY ORDERS TO MATCH HOW THE MARKET OR CROPS ARE PERFORMING. BEING ABLE TO ADAPT IS VERY IMPORTANT, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO FARM-TO-TABLE.

I LOVE BEING ABLE TO TAKE ON GLOBAL FOOD AND CULTURE CONCEPTS WITH IOWA PRODUCTS. OUR VISITORS DON’T USUALLY EXPECT THAT, BUT IOWA IS AN AGRICULTURAL POWERHOUSE. WE ARE LUCKY THAT WE CAN PRODUCE SUCH A WIDE RANGE OF FOODS.”

community and driving people to become passionate about sourcing food locally. Although closing it is bittersweet, I can now look back and know that I completed the mission I set out to achieve,” Baldus said.

Through her work, she has also witnessed the positive impact of the Choose Iowa grant program offered by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship. The program matches Baldus’ vision of connecting consumers to Iowa produce and food products while expanding markets for Iowa producers, inspiring many producers to open brick-and-mortar stores on-site. Participating products proudly display a “Choose Iowa” logo on their packaging or labels.

### The Relationships Behind the Menu

When Baldus started out, her goal was to source 70% of her ingredients locally. Today, she estimates that number sits at 90%. She did this by doing what she does best: cultivating relationships with local

farmers and producers to source her ingredients. She knows the producers by name, understands their practices and often visits their farms, while also coordinating the logistics of the pickup and delivery and quickly pivoting when something doesn’t go as planned.

“In this business, you must be very resourceful. I know what I do isn’t for everybody. I have a go-with-the-flow personality and am always willing to adjust my orders to match how the market or crops are performing,” Baldus said. “Being able to adapt is very important, especially when it comes to farm-to-table.”

Today, Baldus works closely with many Iowa producers. Notably Purple Ribbon Beef in Britt, Skyview Beef in Nora Springs, Milton Creamery in Milton, Mangalitsa Estates in Clearfield, Jóia Food & Fiber Farm in Charles City and many more, but she is always seeking out new food distributors committed to her mission.

### Local Roots go Global

Growing up in Osage, farm-to-table wasn't a trend, but a way of life for Baldus and her family.

"I grew up on a small acreage where we didn't have pre-packaged or pre-made foods. We had a garden; we foraged; we kept livestock. It was just how my family was raised."

Implementing this grassroots approach to dining has attracted people from across the world to Osage. The typical customer at t a s t e . isn't local. Baldus

has cooked for people from Wales, Japan, and all regions of the U.S., often surprising diners with her takes on different food cultures.

"I love being able to take on global food and culture concepts with Iowa products. Our visitors don't usually expect that, but Iowa is an agricultural powerhouse. We are lucky that we can produce such a wide range of foods."

## IOWA BREEZE CAKE

### FOR THE OLD-FASHIONED WHITE CAKE

#### FLUFFY MIX

- 1 pound unsalted butter (room temp.)
- 8 cups granulated sugar

Mix until fluffy.

#### DRY MIX

- 10 ½ cups cake flour
- ¼ cup baking powder
- 1 tablespoon + ½ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 tablespoon + ½ teaspoon salt

Combine all ingredients and slowly add and stir into to "fluffy mix."

#### WET MIX

- 16 eggs
- 2 ⅔ cups sour cream
- 2 cups oil
- 1 cup vanilla
- 5 ⅓ cups milk

Incorporate all ingredients. Slowly add to the fluffy and dry mix.

Once all mixed, divide batter equally into four 9-inch round cake pans that have been greased. Bake at 350 degrees F for approx. 20-30 mins. Let cool.

### FOR THE BUTTERCREAM

- 80 oz. (5 pounds) unsalted butter
- 1 can (14 ounces) sweetened condensed milk
- 1 can (12 ounces) evaporated milk
- 16 cups confectioners sugar
- 2 tablespoons vanilla
- 6 ounces Prairie Breeze crumbled cheese
- 4 cups sweet corn kernels (finely chopped)

Rooted in local flavor and inspired by Iowa agriculture, Baldus shares one of her signature creations for readers to bring a taste of her culinary vision into their own kitchens.

Whip butter with whisk until white, fluffy and airy.

In a separate bowl, whip sweetened condensed milk, evaporated milk, confectioner sugar and vanilla with whisk until sugar is disintegrated.

Slowly add second mixture to whipped butter mix until whipped together and incorporated as one.

Gently fold in crumbled cheese and sweet corn kernels to the buttercream mixture.

Use buttercream to frost the four cooled cakes.

### FOR THE SWEET CORN SAUCE

- 2 cups sweet corn
- 4 ounces chiffonade basil
- 2 ounces finely crumbled Prairie Breeze cheese

Lightly melt 2 cups buttercream with 2 cups sweet corn, add basil and Prairie Breeze. Use this mix to garnish each slice of cake.

Makes (4) 9-inch round cakes to layer.



Photo courtesy of t a s t e .

chef baldus still prioritizes her staple chef's table event



Photo courtesy of t a s t e .

## FARM-TO-TABLE DINNERS

Baldus' role has recently evolved beyond that of a chef and business owner toward culinary consulting. She travels across Iowa, the U.S. and internationally, presenting to students and peers, meeting with farmers in other countries to compare their agriculture and agritourism with Iowa practices and touring local distributors, wineries and restaurants to gain inspiration for her concepts.

All of this is done with one goal in mind: to positively represent Iowa wherever she goes.

"I am proud to use my experiences and talent to represent Iowa agriculture and culinary arts on a world stage. I'm fully focused on building up Iowa food producers and chefs," Baldus said.

Even if she's trying to relax on vacation, she can't turn off her thirst for knowledge, often doing some on-the-ground research.

"I'll usually find myself at a local cheese shop, speaking to the owner about my favorite cheese from back home: Prairie Breeze," Baldus jokes.

Regardless of her frequent travels and growing reputation, Baldus still prioritizes her staple chef's table events back home in Osage.

"Farm-to-table dinners will always be a part of my story. I will always make time for my home. I feel lucky to have created something rewarding that works so well for my business, my family and my community." 🌿



FROM FARM FIELDS TO  
*faucets*



Nick Helland with his dog Jewel checking cover crops near Madrid.

RURAL AND URBAN IOWANS DEPEND ON EACH OTHER FOR CLEAN WATER.

By Darcy Maulsby

Imagine turning on the faucet — and nothing comes out.

No clean drinking water. No shower. No water for the garden or lawn.

Water is so interwoven into daily life that it's easy to overlook — yet rural and urban Iowans depend on each other for clean water.

“Water quality is also important for recreation, tourism and our economy,” notes Rebekah Jones, communications director with the Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance (IAWA).

In recent years, IAWA teamed up with Exile Brewing Company in Des Moines for a new beer made with all-Iowa ingredients for the “Born Here, Brewed Here” campaign. For each case of beer sold, \$5 went toward water quality improvements around Iowa.

“You can't have good-tasting beer without clean water,”



Jones (pictured above) says. “Partnerships like this bridge rural-urban connections.”

The Des Moines Water Works (DMWW) is strengthening these connections, too. As a contract operator for Central Iowa Water Works, DMWW provides water to 600,000 residents in a four-county area.

DMWW collaborates with many partners, including Practical Farmers of Iowa and Iowa State University Extension, which offers conservation-focused landowner education programs. In 2022, DMWW helped purchase a seeder to increase cover crop acres and improve water quality in the Des Moines and Raccoon River watersheds. Heartland

Co-op has used this machine to seed tens of thousands of acres of cover crops for farmers and landowners.

DMWW has also teamed up with Iowa Learning Farms for “Conservation on Tap.” During these in-person gatherings, farmers, landowners and other Iowans can come together to discuss conservation practices and ask questions.

“We view water quality as a joint responsibility,” says Melissa Walker, DMWW communications and outreach manager. “We all have a role in this.”

**Turning Conservation into Action**

To keep these conversations going, DMWW took its annual legislative event on the road in 2025. DMWW board members, Iowa legislators and staff, and representatives from IAWA, Polk County Public Works, the Beaver Creek Watershed

**COVER CROPS' ROOTS IMPROVE SOIL STRUCTURE AND WATER INFILTRATION.**



Nick Helland enjoys educating guests to his farm about his conservation efforts.

Cereal rye is one of Iowa's most popular cover crops, valued for its ability to establish quickly in the fall and protect soil through the winter months.



The nitrate removal facility at the Fleur Drive Treatment Plant, operated by Des Moines Water Works.



Native prairie in Iowa.



Filters are part of the treatment process at the Fleur Drive Treatment Plant.



Construction of a bioreactor.

and Heartland Co-op visited Nick Helland's farm to learn about conservation practices that protect water quality.

"It's critical to keep the lines of communication open," says Helland, whose family has farmed north of Des Moines near the junction of Polk, Boone and Story counties since 1861. "We want to show people what's possible with conservation on the farm."

The Helland farm proves that cleaner water isn't someone else's responsibility. It starts locally — one field, one partnership at a time. What began as a shift to no-till farming in the 1990s has evolved into a full-scale conservation effort.

The Helland family has incorporated cover crops (including cereal rye) on their acres since 2012. The cover crops' roots improve soil structure and water infiltration. Allowing the soil to absorb more water helps control runoff and erosion.

Since 2021, the Helland family has also installed eight bioreactors and saturated buffers along their field edges to help filter water naturally before it enters the Des Moines watershed. "We've kind of become a conservation show farm," says Helland, who received the Iowa Soybean Association's (ISA) 2026 Environmental Leader Award.

Saturated buffers and bioreactors are part of Iowa's innovative "batch and build" model. Coordinated by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship,

this system expedites the installation of edge-of-field conservation practices across multiple farms, accelerating water quality improvements.

Saturated buffers divert ag tile drainage water into grassy zones along the edge of the field, where soil microbes naturally remove nitrates before the water reaches streams. Bioreactors are buried trenches filled with woodchips. Ag tile drainage water flows through the bioreactors, where microbes help remove nitrates.

In 2024, Helland restored a 3-acre wetland near Big Creek. The wetland helps remove excess nitrates from 170 acres of cropland, serving as a critical last stop for water heading toward Des Moines.

In years past, Helland battled flooding that repeatedly damaged the area after heavy rains. Today, native plants and wildlife thrive there. "This used to be a pain point," Helland says. "I devoted a lot of time to fixing washouts there. Switching from this high-maintenance farming to conservation has made the rest of my farm more efficient."

In 2026, Helland is partnering with ISA's conservation team to restore an oxbow. This project will remove

sediment from an old stream meander to restore natural flood water storage and create habitat for the Topeka shiner, a tiny fish that is listed on the federal Endangered Species Act.

"ISA has really stepped up when it comes to conservation and water quality," says Helland, who is also working with ISA to add pollinator habitat on his land.



**Cedar Rapids Promotes Sponge Cities, "Sponge Farming"**

ISA has also teamed up with the City of Cedar Rapids since 2017 to promote conservation practices that reduce runoff and nitrates in the Middle Cedar River Watershed. This region includes 1.5 million acres spanning 10 counties in eastern and east-central Iowa. More than 70% of this area is dedicated to row-crop production.

"Ag is central to who we are as a community," says Mary Beth Stevenson, watersheds and source water program manager with the City of Cedar Rapids. "Cedar Rapids is an urban hub for ag processing, with plants like Cargill, ADM and Quaker Oats. Ag does bring environmental challenges, though, with nitrates that impact the drinking water supply."



“WE’RE GRATEFUL FOR THE FARMERS THAT BUILD HEALTHY, RESILIENT SOIL AND SLOW THE FLOW OF WATER ON THE LANDSCAPE.”

MARY BETH STEVENSON

The wetlands of Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt near Bondurant act as a natural filter, soaking up runoff and helping protect the Skunk River watershed.

The City of Cedar Rapids coordinates water monitoring across 60 locations in seven Iowa counties across the Middle Cedar River Watershed. “We’ve been tracking nitrates in the Cedar River for more than 20 years,” Stevenson notes.

The City of Cedar Rapids also leads the Cedar River Source Water Partnership (CRSWP). The CRSWP is a \$16 million project funded by United States Department of Agriculture – Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) and 13 partners.

The CRSWP works to reduce downstream flood risk, improve wildlife habitat and support farmers who want to implement more conservation on their acres. “The end goal is to reduce nitrate to manageable levels, so it doesn’t negatively affect drinking water,” Stevenson says.

Funding through CRSWP helps fund a conservation agronomist position within a local ag cooperative. “We’re grateful for the farmers who have teamed up with us to

try new conservation practices that build healthy, resilient soil and slow the flow of water on the landscape,” Stevenson says.

Healthy soils function like sponges, absorbing water more effectively. “Sponge farming is an agricultural twist on sponge cities,” Stevenson adds. Sponge cities imitate natural ecosystems in their approach to rainwater management. Cedar Rapids promotes rain gardens and other clean-water solutions.

“We want to keep going with this watershed partnership approach to improve water quality for everyone,” says Stevenson, who received the 2023 IAWA Public Impact Award for her partnership efforts.

**Local Efforts Lead to Big Results**

Investing in watershed-wide partnerships helps accelerate positive change. Consider the Central Iowa Clean Water Partnership (CICWP), which includes Ducks Unlimited and the IAWA. CICWP has invested

nearly \$1 million in constructing wetlands and improving water quality since 2022.

Strategically placed wetlands can remove up to 90% of nitrates from farmland drainage.

Multiple wetlands have been installed on farms and urban areas, Jones says. This includes the

8,388+ acre Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt in northeast Polk County.

All these efforts offer a powerful reminder: protecting water begins close to home. Jones likes a compelling quote from the late Jane Goodall, the renowned conservationist who challenged the “think globally” mindset.

“If you think globally, you will become filled with doom. But if you take a little piece of this whole picture... this is what I can do here...gradually the pieces get filled in, and the world is a better place, because of you.”

**STRATEGICALLY-PLACED WETLANDS CAN REMOVE UP TO 90% OF NITRATES FROM FARMLAND DRAINAGE.**



Photo courtesy of Cassie Druehl from Polk County

Urban rain garden in Polk County.

## Man's Best Friend or Farm's Best Asset?

AN ODE TO THE EVEN-TEMPERED BERNESE MOUNTAIN DOG

By Summer Ory



Summer Ory works with four families to grow soybeans and corn and raise cattle in Madison County. She graduated with a degree in business management from Iowa State University. Summer is involved with the sales and operations of a local Pioneer seed dealership and serves as president of the Earlham School Foundation. She's also participated in the Iowa Soybean Association's (ISA) Iowa-Missouri Grassroots Fellowship, Communications Squad and serves on the ISA Board of Directors.

**M**an's best friend — there's a reason for the saying. Dogs are loyal, loving and adventure-seeking companions.

When I met my first Bernese Mountain Dog, it was shortly after our daughter's brain tumor diagnosis at the tender, young age of four years old. We were deeply shaken and shipwrecked by a wave we never saw coming. During that time, we needed a new light, a distraction from the doctor visits and long, hard days the seasons around the farm brought us.

We didn't know just how much we needed a dog. Until we got two. Life unfolded, childhood memories formed. The pure, innocent bond between dog and child brought needed smiles all around. There were happy treks through the woods after days filled with schoolwork and equipment headaches. There were quiet, sun-filled afternoons on the porch, the loyal dogs soaking in the rays by our feet.

I didn't know that being a Bernese Mountain Dog owner would change my entire life. Now as a breeder, I pore over pedigrees and multiple generations of health testing to decide how to champion future

offspring. Trying to stack the odds in my — and their — favor for the very best trio of temperament, physical soundness and breed type. Animal breeding is an art form, with a bit of science and help from God.

There are many quality breeders who desire the same, and their legacies created the foundation for me to be able to carry on during my tenure breeding the Bernese Mountain Dog. The Berner originated in the Swiss canton of Bern, where their primary duties included pulling dairy carts, driving cattle, guarding farm property and helping transport goods through mountain terrain. Their strength, intelligence and dependable temperament made them an essential part of daily farm life.

On our farm in Iowa, the Berners live a more modern lifestyle. They are still the guardians of the farm. They watch us garden, explore our pastures and timber with the kids, climb our dirt mountains, wade in our natural creeks and ponds and occasionally get scrubbed head to tail to visit dog shows.

The dog shows we attended introduced us to a new pack of people, and from there, I took a deep dive

into better health testing and breeding for the future of the Berner breed. Every dog has a collection of health tests that help paint a picture of how that genetic line is thriving. We even send blood samples to France for a specific cancer-marker test that helps us reduce the risk of the No.1 cancer in the breed.

We might as well start passing around toy ducks like the Jeep owners do, because being owned by a Berner is a special club. I've cried with farm friends when they have said good-bye to their faithful dog of 15 years and savored the highs like our Grand Champion Johnny winning big at the beauty contest just days after being

completely soaked in his favorite muddy creek with the kids.

Like my farmer grandpa Leroy says, "it's all gone to the dogs."

One day, when I look back, it won't be the big wins or the work accomplished, it will just be the family, the dog, the memories — just like it's always been. 🍃



Adeline (9), Clay (7) and Hunter (5, not pictured) love their dogs Vickie and Sally.

ANIMAL BREEDING IS AN ART FORM, WITH A BIT OF SCIENCE AND HELP FROM GOD.

# fresh pickings magazine

**SOYBEAN MEAL IS WIDELY USED IN AQUACULTURE FEEDS AROUND THE WORLD.**

**TENDING TO THE SWEETBY PHENOMENON.**

As a freshwater fisherman, you know your fish are healthy. But what if you could make them even healthier? That's where soybean meal comes in. It's a natural source of protein and essential amino acids that can help your fish grow faster and stay healthier. And it's not just for fish. Soybean meal is also used in poultry and swine feeds. So it's a win-win for everyone.

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**TO MITIGATE STORMS AND EROSION, OATS ARE PLANTED ALONG WITH THE ONIONS.**

**KITRESON BROTHERS, POSIDES AND ONIONS CAN BE FOUND IN MORE THAN 50 GROCERY STORES THROUGHOUT IOWA.**

Kitreson Brothers, Posides and Onions can be found in more than 50 grocery stores throughout Iowa. This is a testament to the quality and popularity of their products. The company has a long history of providing fresh, locally sourced produce to the community. Their commitment to quality and customer service is what sets them apart from the rest.

**IT'S ESTIMATED THAT THERE ARE 96 MILLION BIRDS NATIONWIDE.**

**A BIRD'S EYE VIEW**

From the farm to the fork, birds play a vital role in our food system. They help control pests, improve soil health, and provide us with delicious meat and eggs. It's time to take a closer look at these amazing creatures and the ways they contribute to our lives. This issue of Fresh Pickings explores the many benefits of raising and eating local, pasture-raised poultry.

**"WE LOVE WORKING WITH LIVESTOCK. THERE'S NOTHING BETTER THAN FEEDING A FRESH BAWLY CALF ON WHEAT CRACKS."**

**ROTTED IN**

Whether you're a farmer or a foodie, you know the importance of fresh, locally sourced produce. This issue of Fresh Pickings explores the many ways that local agriculture is making a difference in our lives. From the farm to the fork, we're showcasing the best of Iowa's food system.

**U**ban farming involves harvesting community gardens, as well as growing food in public and healthy food. As urban farming grows in popularity, more city dwellers are benefiting from the fresh, locally sourced produce that these gardens provide.

**BENEFIT & ACCESSIBILITY**

Urban farming offers many benefits, including fresh, locally sourced produce, community building, and access to green space. It's a great way to get involved in your community and improve your health. This issue of Fresh Pickings explores the many ways that urban farming is making a difference in our lives.

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