

The First Annual American Chestnut Restoration Feast

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It's been said that a squirrel could travel from Maine to Georgia on branches of the American Chestnut tree without touching the ground. This fact was shared by Kathy Marmet, president of the Maryland Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation over a five-course meal held Friday evening, Nov. 10, at ThorpeWood in Thurmont. The former 'king of the forest,' the American Chestnut tree once spread from southern Ontario down the Appalachians to the Mississippi. From the Atlantic Ocean the tree made its home all the way to the Ohio Valley. A tree so large it could dominate even oaks that grew nearby, the American Chestnut once reached heights of 100 feet and the diameter of its base could be five feet across. As a fast and prolific grower, it would be the first tree to return to cleared lots.

The trunks of the tree grew tall, straight and strong, as the beams in ThorpeWood's main dining area may attest to: they are made of reclaimed Chestnut, proving the wood's sustainability and strength. The pioneer species played a special role in iron furnaces, and the rich tannins extracted from its bark played a special role in both protecting the wood from decay and also in tanning leather.

So, if the wood is so strong and resilient, why was there a fundraiser to help save the species? Because, due to blight, only 50 years ago the tree was nearly extinct. There are several varieties of Chestnut trees across the globe: the Chinese Chestnut, Japanese Chestnut, and the European Sweet Chestnut, among others. Most trees are similar, having only a few small differences such as the distance of space between the saw-edged 'teeth' that surround each leaf's border, or a twig tip that is either bald or hairy. The most dramatic difference between the Chinese Chestnut and the American Chestnut, however, is that the Chinese Chestnut tree is immune to a specific fungus-formed blight and the American Chestnut is not. That's why when the Chinese Chestnut began being imported to America in the late 19th century, no one had any idea that it would cause seemingly irreparable damage to its American brother.

Cankers caused by the fungal infection causes the trunk of American Chestnut trees to split, and has killed off billions of the once-thriving trees. Introduced either by importing whole trees or by imported lumber (the cause remains unknown), the disease was first noted in the Bronx Zoo in 1904. By 1950, the disease had spread so quickly (at a rate of 50 miles a year), the American Chestnut tree looked as though it was off the American landscape forever, at least on the East Coast.

Trees isolated several miles away from another American Chestnut have not yet succumb to the disease, and quite a few forests on the West Coast still have considerable amounts of trees alive and doing well. Most notably among them, the largest chestnut trees in America are in Jackson County, Tenn. Other large crops are in Sherwood, Oregon, and many trees can be found as far north as Revelstoke, British Columbia.

But it's the East Coast king that the American Chestnut Foundation is working to bring back to power, and it was Kathy Marmet who, on one fateful camping trip, came up with the idea to host a chestnut-themed dinner at ThorpeWood to help raise money for the cause.

The foundation and the feast

The American Chestnut Foundation works on a genetic level to help cross breed American Chestnuts with the blight-resistant Chinese tree. Hoping to imbue the American Chestnut with the Chinese variety's disease resistance but keep the basic make-up of the American tree intact, the Foundation has worked extensively with growers in the area, ThorpeWood, as the first breeding site in Maryland, being a leading location among them.

Ms. Marmet was camping only six weeks ago when she stumbled across chef Mario Raymond, of the Washington Court Hotel. She expressed her interest in having a dinner at ThorpeWood wherein every course would feature the famed nut. Mr. Raymond signed on, and approached several of his chef friends in the Baltimore and Washington areas to assist him. Within a month and a half, ThorpeWood's large warm dining room was filled with over 80 guests and volunteers dedicated to preserving one of America's heritage trees by enjoying a delectable fine meal.

The American Chestnut Foundation had information available for all as guests enjoyed hot apple cider and chestnuts roasted on an open fire. Chef Dave White of the Common Market created the hors d'oeuvre: dates stuffed with chestnuts and cheese. Cool and refreshing with the warm apple cider, the hors d'oeuvre primed the palate for more chestnut flavor, which would play both primary and secondary flavors in each of the courses to come.

As guests took their seats in ThorpeWood's natural wooden dining room, Ms. Marmet introduced herself, her husband, and the staff, which was made up entirely of volunteers. Sam Castleman, executive director of ThorpeWood, along with Julie Parlamen (events coordinator), worked as wait staff along with half a dozen others, while Cynthia Thurmon, also of the Washington Court Hotel, donated her time and coordination services for the evening, ensuring that the night went seamlessly. Kitchen staff volunteers helped the five renowned chefs in the back, while others volunteered their time to help coordinate parking, greeting, and roasting the chestnuts, all 50 pounds of which were donated.

Ms. Marmet then introduced chef Joe Harran of Washington's famed Bistro Bis. Mr. Harran, working for a modern French restaurant such as Bistro Bis, brought his ability and understanding of complementary flavors to ThorpeWood with his crème marron, a French roasted chestnut soup. Thick and sweet, the soup was countered with savory chestnut spaetzle, a small German noodle made with chestnut flour for the occasion, duck confit, and chopped chestnuts. Creamy but still light, the soup paired well with the first wine of the evening, the 2004 Domaine Jean-Bernard Goussu Chardonnay. Like so much else of the generous evening, the wines were donated by International Cellars, Inc.

The second course was designed by the chef coordinator of the night, Mario Raymond. His lobster, butternut squash and chestnut "canneloni" were exquisite. With the look of a spring roll, the canneloni were filled with delicious pieces of lobster. The butternut squash scent was warming and delicious, and the chestnut flavor was present, though understated. The canneloni rested upon a bed of fennel orange salad and curry oil. The fennel was light and mild, and was a wonderful accompaniment to the course. The Chardonnay was also served.

Chef Mohamed Hassan, of Bistro 525 in the Washington Court Hotel, presented the third course, a rich salad made with roasted red and yellow beets, baby mache and frisee, verjus pommery dressing, and a delightful little round of cheese from the Vermont Butter and Cheese Company, also donated. The "bijou," French for jewel, is a small round of goat cheese wrapped in a natural geotricum rind, a flavorful bite of cheese that thoroughly complements the salad. During the pause between courses, Ms. Marmet introduced both the chefs and also bits of American Chestnut tree history. The wine served for this course was a rich and velvety Merlot, a 2002 vintage from JT vineyards in Russian River, Calif. The buttery flavor of the wine complemented nicely the creamy goat cheese, and the Chestnut Citrus Artisan bread, provided by the Common Market's Pablo Cazuela, also added additional warmth and flavor to the course.

The entree was undoubtedly the highlight of the evening. Chef Jason Drysdale of Norwegian Cruise Lines introduced a foie gras roasted venison with mushroom assiette and chestnut truffle dumplings in a pear szechuan sauce. A citrus pepper also permeated the flavors, which all worked wonderfully together. The game, which was tender and moist, was so hearty and delicious, if one hadn't already eaten three prior courses (with another to come), seconds might've been demanded. And given that American Chestnut trees had often provided both food and fall mast for white-tail deer, the meal seemed entirely appropriate. Merlot was also served, an excellent backdrop for the rich game flavor.

For dessert, Chef Jodi Hassan, wife of Mohamed, presented her own warm chestnut spice cake topped with apple cider and clove gelato on a bed of candied chestnuts. The taste was extraordinary; warm and light, with a sweetness present but not too overpowering. The combination of the warmth of the cake and candied chestnuts and the cool, vibrant texture of the sorbetto was outstanding, and paired with the 2004 Demeter Furmint, a dessert wine similar to mead, from Tokay, Hungary, was winning. It provided an

excellent finishing touch to an absolutely gourmet meal.

While the dinner was gorgeous and ThorpeWood the perfect setting, the biggest achievement of the evening was raising money for the American Chestnut Foundation and the work it does to help save an American giant. Those attending the feast will probably demand a second annual event next year, and if all goes well, squirrels may travel the Appalachian route from Maine to Georgia on the branches of American Chestnut trees once again.