

The Harvest Dinner

As I leave the house each morning, the air is refreshingly crisp and increasingly cool. The blanket of leaves on my lawn grows thicker each time I look out the window. And my summer crops are on their last leg last leg, but a bumper crop of winter squash and pumpkins punctuate the garden with vibrant orange, yellow and green. All of these signs lead me to one unarguable conclusion: It's time for the Harvest Dinner Party.

Each year, I host a dinner party where every menu item contains at least one homegrown ingredient. Much of the produce for this event comes from my garden, but my friends also contribute ingredients they have produced. Rene, who was raised on a large farm, but now lives on a nice sized acreage, supplies fresh eggs plus chicken, pork or beef from their small menagerie of farm animals. She even has fresh honey from the hives a friend tends on her land. Last year, the only crop Karen had to contribute was rhubarb. After a thorough internet search, she was assigned rhubarb sorbet to cleanse our palates between courses.

Lack of a green thumb does not exclude attendees from the cooking process. Teri, a busy executive who doesn't spend a lot of time in the kitchen, was assigned to prepare a dessert using fresh pumpkins. I wish I'd had a camera to capture her expression when I dropped off a sack full of sugar pumpkins and directions on how to prepare pumpkin pulp.

Last year, we added a new twist to our dinner. After attending the Iowa Wine Festival, we decided to complement our meal with a selection of local varieties rather than purchase wines from California or Australia. While we didn't grow the grapes ourselves, drinking the fruits of our local vintner's labors enhanced the ambience of our celebration.

The Harvest Dinner is one of my favorite ways to share all the wonderful produce my summer of seeding, watering and weeding has produced. It's one of the important traditions that bind our friendship.

What Great Time's traditions do you enjoy with your friends and family? How do you involve food and wine? What makes your traditions special? Tell us about your favorite fall and holiday traditions and we'll publish the best ideas on our web site.

For more ideas on Great Times with Wine, check the fall issue of Make Mine Wine magazine for articles on Northeast Iowa Wine Country Tours, delicious tailgating recipes, an Iowa restaurant with an extensive wine list, and tips on upping your wine IQ.

-- Jennifer Wilson