

The Farmer's Table

By Deborah L. Cox,

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Fifty-six acres of beautiful creek bottom land in Walnut Cove, which is gorgeous land for crops, cows, crickets, and Maggie! Maggie is the friendly, loving, chocolate lab companion watching over Ann and Bill Smith, two of the nicest members of the farming community you will ever meet. And around town and surrounding cities, Ann is known as the Tomato Lady while Bill is known just as “her helper.” But it is Bill’s story with the land that makes this a true Stokes County local food story.

Bill’s Father was a sharecropper on this farm while growing up in Walnut Cove. Sharecroppers were tenant farmers who were provided credit, seeds, tools, and living quarters, and who worked the land to receive an agreed-upon share of the crop, minus charges. Songwriter Woodie Guthrie wrote many wonderful ballads and tales of the highs and lows of this farming arrangement after the Great Depression. So it is with great pride that Bill and Ann were able to purchase this farm in 1981 to start their own adventures in farming. For many years they prospered growing tobacco on the farm, then they transitioned to wine grapes. But now they are very productive with heirloom tomatoes, which is 90% of their crop, with the other 10% being zucchini, specialty green beans, like the haricot vert, the long French style green bean and yellow wax beans, peppers, beets, carrots, and other squashes.

According to Karen Russ and David Bradshaw of Clemson University Extension, “Heirloom vegetables are defined in several ways. Some consider heirlooms to be any vegetable cultivars that have been grown for a certain length of time. Other people consider vegetables to be truly heirlooms only if being passed down by a family or group who has preserved them. Heirlooms are always open-pollinated, since hybrid seeds cannot be maintained by ordinary means. However heirloom vegetables are defined, interest is increasing in our edible heritage.” Ann really enjoys the heritage variety for their flavor. They have over 70 varieties of heirloom tomatoes within the 2,000 plants they have planted this year. Their farm practices organic gardening and are a certified Naturally-Grown Farm. They are anxiously awaiting their newest discovery that again connects them with the land and heritage. While visiting Monticello one day, they were fortunate to meet the tomato curator on the grounds, who picked them three beautiful tomatoes to bring home to North Carolina. They have saved the seeds from this black tomato variety known to be grown by Thomas Jefferson. The purple Calabash will be ready in July and you can try this treasure when you find them at the markets in Winston-Salem. In 2010 and 2012, they have been winners in the Winston-Salem Tomato Tasting Contest. They hope the purple Calabash will take the prize this year.

Ann and Bill enjoy their retirement on the farm. But there is very little time for rest on a farm; the only one getting any time to lie around is Maggie. You can find them all at Oldtown in Walnut Cove and at the market.

Ann and Bill’s favorite tomato recipe is tomato, two pieces of bread, and Duke’s® mayonnaise for the classic “mater” sandwich. Then she graciously offered this Tomato Pie recipe. Enjoy!

Tomato Pie

1 Deep Dish Pie Shell

3 Heirloom tomatoes sliced thick and peeled (more if needed)

Pat Dry with paper towel to remove moisture

½ teaspoon sea salt

½ teaspoon pepper

½ teaspoon dried Basil **OR** 1.5 teaspoon fresh Basil

½ cup chopped onions

½ cup mayonnaise

2 cups grated cheese of your choice

Bake pie shell at 425 degrees for 5 minutes. Place the tomatoes in the shell. Mix salt, pepper, basil, and sprinkle over tomatoes. Sprinkle chopped onions over tomatoes. Mix mayonnaise and cheese together; spread on top. Bake at 400 degrees for 30 minutes. Place foil over the top of the pie if cheese begins to brown too much. Cool for 10-15 minutes before slicing.