

A love of place, and its food

THE ZINSMEISTERS' 'FINGER LAKES FEAST' CELEBRATES THE CUISINE ORIGINATING IN OUR BACK YARD

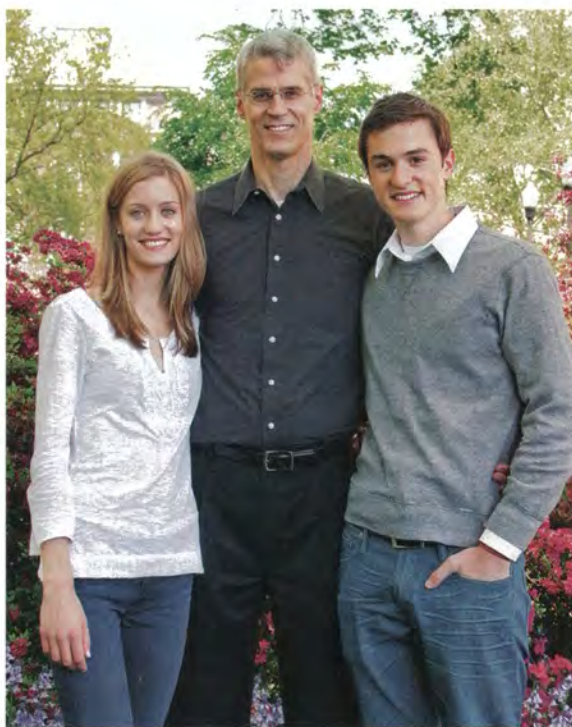
BY WILLIAM LaRUE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NOAH ZINSMEISTER

A passion for home-grown cuisine began for author Karl Zinsmeister as a boy in Baldwinsville, where his father tended a half-acre garden and his mother canned fresh fruit and vegetables.

His experiences dining out nurtured that affection. Restaurant chefs in the Finger Lakes region don't mind coming out of the kitchen to chat, he says, and they never treat their food as art where "you're breaking all the rules by enjoying it your way."

So he wasn't all that surprised, Zinsmeister says, that 29 of 30 local chefs he contacted were happy to provide a recipe for a new book he's co-authored, "Finger Lakes Feast: 110 Delicious Recipes from New York's Hotspot for Wholesome Local Foods" (McBooks Press, \$22.95).

"That would not happen with great chefs in most cities," he says. "That's just the kind of open, sharing, cooperative ►



"Finger Lakes Feast" was written by Karl Zinsmeister, center, and his daughter, Kate Harvey, and illustrated with son Noah's photographs, including the landscape above.

nature of the food culture in this region. It's extremely unpretentious."

Even better, he says, the quality of the freshly grown and prepared food in the Finger Lakes region is second to none.

The 208-page book, co-authored with Zinsmeister's daughter, Kate Harvey, and featuring photography by his son, Noah, is much more than a collection of regionally inspired recipes.

Woven through its pages are often quirky tales of history and science, such as how the leafy buckwheat plant grows wild near Penn Yan because seeds leaked from trucks hauling them to be processed at The Birkett Mills on Main Street. In the book, a recipe for buckwheat crepes accompanies the story.

The tone of "Finger Lakes Feast" is that of a love letter to the region, extolling not only its culinary and agricultural products but also the hard-working individuals who make them happen.

"Along with nature's blessing, the other irreplaceable component of great food is creative and industrious people. Here, too, the Finger Lakes are special," Zinsmeister and Harvey write in the introduction.

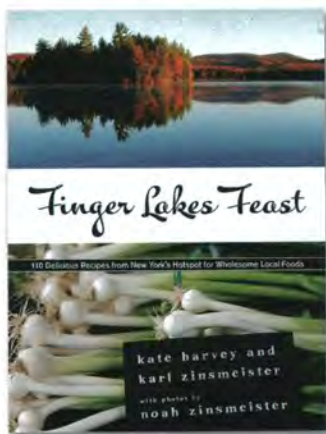
This is the first book for Harvey and her brother. But their 53-year-old father, a longtime writer, has authored several books, including two about his experiences as an embedded reporter during the Iraq War. Karl Zinsmeister is also known

for his stint from 2006 to 2009 as chief domestic policy adviser to President George W. Bush.

One of Zinsmeister's goals in co-authoring "Finger Lakes Feast" was to put a spotlight on the continuing improvements to the region's wine, restaurant cuisine, freshly grown produce and agricultural methods — "this kind of cultural and economical bloom that's taking place right now in our back yard," he says.

He also savored the chance to work closely

The Zinsmeisters' book celebrates the region's freshly grown produce, as shown at a farmstand in Jacksonville (Tompkins County) in one of Noah Zinsmeister's photos.



"Finger Lakes Feast," published by McBooks Press, is available at many stores in the Finger Lakes region or from Independent Publishers Group at 800-888-4741.

with his grown children on a family project, which he hopes will help them become established as authors. Harvey lives in New York City, where she writes a blog, and teaches and plays classical music. Her brother is a student at Columbia University.

The Yale University-educated Karl Zinsmeister commutes every other week to his Cazenovia home from Washington, D.C., where he is vice president for publications at the Philanthropy Roundtable, a national organization devoted to promoting charitable giving.

"Central New York in general is a passion of mine," he says. "I love the winters. I love to drive it. I love to bike it. I love to walk it. I love to grow things in the soil," he says. "This book is one of the things I did out of enjoyment and true admiration and respect for the people and the land."

While his wife, Ann, wasn't involved in producing the book, her expertise and influences are nonetheless present.

The first recipe listed is "Ann's Granola," named after her



household treat that, compared with store-bought granola, the book notes, “is crunchier, less sweet, has more range in flavor (not just oats), and includes lots of nuts, seeds, and fruit to keep things interesting.”

The book credits the emergence of fine wines in the Finger Lakes over the past two decades as the single biggest factor in the growth of the region’s culinary reputation. The key was scientists figuring out how to grow better grapes in the cold climate, making wines produced from them as good as ones from Europe.

As wine improved, great chefs arrived in the region, opening restaurants that lured tourists seeking meals made with fresh, locally grown food. Farmers began focusing on growing fancier fruits and vegetables. Some entrepreneurs stepped in to meet the demand for innovative vegetable oils, fresh fish, honey, wild game and other products.

This agricultural bounty is primarily enjoyed by full-time residents, whose options for fresh food include about 70 ▶



ROASTED ROOT VEGETABLES

Adapted from a recipe by Simply Red Bistro in Ovid, NY.

This dish is aromatic and warming, great for a winter’s evening. Made from vegetables you can keep around for months without spoilage, it is unfussy, inexpensive and wholesome — yet elegantly tasty. You can substitute other root vegetables for slight variations of flavor or color.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup rutabaga, peeled and diced into half-inch pieces
- 1 cup parsnips, peeled and sliced one quarter-inch thick
- 1 cup turnips, peeled and sliced one quarter-inch thick
- ¼ cup shallots, green onions, or leeks, sliced
- 3 garlic cloves, chopped
- ¼ cup squash-seed or olive oil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon dried basil
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme
- ½ teaspoon dried oregano
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped

PREPARATION

In an oven-proof dish with a cover, toss all the ingredients except the parsley and then bake covered for one and one-half hours at 375 degrees. The vegetables will caramelize slightly when they are done. Toss with parsley and serve. Serves 4–6.





Along with images that accompany many recipes, Noah Zinsmeister's photos capture the rustic essence of the Finger Lakes.

farmers markets and more than 150 you-pick farms.

Another benefit is the economic impact of food and wine tourism, which draws an estimated 4 million people annually to the region, Zinsmeister says.

"New York is now the No. 3 destination in the country for culinary tourists ... and it has a big upside to get even bigger," he said. "Our economy has been very sad for much of my lifetime, and we're all trying to find hooks and ways to bolster it."

The authors carefully tested each recipe printed in the book, often simplifying and changing proportions of restaurant ingredients to make them work in a home kitchen. Some of the book's best recipes came not only from chefs but from food vendors, farmers, friends and family, Zinsmeister says.

"We really had fun one summer just churning things out. Noah would photograph them and, before they were cold, we'd dive in and we'd take notes and sometimes we'd disagree, but not very often," he says.

The book is peppered, too, with Noah Zinsmeister's photos of regional scenery, such as shots of a snow-covered stream and people canoeing on a lake, that help place the cuisine into perspective with culture and geography.

The recipes focus on ingredients grown or produced in Central New York, with frequent peeks at regional inventions and innovations.

The book includes a recipe for Syracuse Salt Potatoes, popularized in the 1800s by workers making salt by boiling down brine extracted from deposits in the region. When they put small potatoes into the boiling vats of salt water, out



came a creamy treat with a crunchy skin.

Another example is "Cornell Chicken," a pungent barbecue marinade that, as the recipe in the book shows, includes a generous use of apple-cider vinegar. The process was invented by Robert Baker, who was a poultry science professor at Cornell University looking to encourage consumption of chicken.

The book finds success stories in almost every area of agriculture in the Finger Lakes region, such as the boom in Greek yogurt production, a new process to make vegetable oil from squash seeds, and a "hydroponics revolution" in growing lettuce and other plants in water.

"I hope people can understand this is not a little blip," Zinsmeister says of the food revolution under way in Central New York. "The whole area is firing on many cylinders." ❖

