

eat a chef's dish



All for One

In the Great Smoky Mountains, a talented crew of kitchen and farm hands redefine Tennessee taste.



Written by Laurel Miller
Photography by Heather Anne Thomas



Left: The Barn restaurant in winter. Below: One of the milking sheep at Blackberry.



Farm manager John Corkendal sorting beans

(Preceding page) Top left: Chef de cuisine, Adam Cooke. Top right: Preserves-maker, Maggie Davidson. Bottom: A view from the Main House.

The sun rises like a cheesecloth-cloaked fireball over the misty hickory-and-pine forest surrounding Blackberry Farm in the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. By late morning, this characteristic fog will burn off, leaving the 4,200-acre sheep dairy and guest retreat, with its creamery and two acclaimed restaurants, swathed in sultry humidity and the trill of cicadas.

While it didn't start out that way, cheese has come to embody the vitality of this unique farm. It represents not only the fertile land, but also what can be achieved when inspired individuals come together to pursue a common goal—what resident chef de cuisine Adam Cooke, at The Barn restaurant, calls “a shared desire to work, cook, craft, and be around food.” Cooke, along with chef de cuisine Joseph Lenn and corporate chef Josh Feathers, his colleagues at Blackberry's other restaurant, the Main House, work closely with cheesemaker Adam Spannaus to create a refined version of Great Smoky Mountains cuisine, which is dictated by the seasonal variations in their sheep's milk production. In addition to the chefs and Spannaus—himself a former chef—the food and farm team consists of sommeliers, a master gardener, shepherds, a forager, a preservationist, a beekeeper, a butcher, and a bread baker. As an ensemble, they collaborate to showcase Blackberry's sustainably raised products, including milk, meat, tree crops, heirloom vegetables, and honey.

While the farm's five different cheeses (see p. 94) and sheep's milk are excellent in their own right, the chefs have made them a fundamental part of Blackberry's cuisine. Breakfast and lunch at the Main House mean homey treats such as panna cotta with fresh peaches, cornmeal pudding with maple cream cheese, charcoal-grilled lamb on piadina (Italian flatbread) with cucumber yogurt, and shaved summer vegetables topped with clumps of fresh, buttery cheese curds. The Barn, housed in a lofty, spectacularly restored 1700s farm structure, opened in 2007 with the now 29-year-old Cooke at the helm. Like Spannaus, he excels at transforming raw ingredients into a superlative end product, one that the national press has hailed for its melding of simple, rustic, local ingredients with classical technique.

Cooke is no stranger to dairy animals either. The son of self-described “hippies,” he grew up on a small farm in the Bitterroot Mountains of western Montana, raising chickens, milking cows, and making cheese and yogurt. Initially self-taught, he decided to pursue a formal education at the New England Culinary Institute when he was 22. He arrived at Blackberry in 2005, working under former executive chef John Fleer.

Cooke says he finds inspiration in the region's little-known culinary heritage and use of foraged foods. “It's a lesser-known facet of Southern cuisine,” he explains. “The food is very vegetable based, while meat (often in cured form) is more of a garnish.” His interpretation combines the flavors of perfectly ripe fruit, the crisp snap of just-harvested produce, the smoky perfume of a neigh-

“Sheep’s milk isn’t assertive, but it elevates the other ingredients and lets them shine.”

bor’s country ham, or the tang of vegetable pickles put up by food preservationist Maggie Davidson. At Blackberry, his philosophy is simple: try to use what exists on the farm. Cheese and milk are key components of his daily menus. “Sheep’s milk isn’t assertive, and it elevates the other ingredients and lets them shine. . . . Our menus grow out of what’s in season and the different stages of the sheep’s lactation. I love the milk in risotto, yogurt-based chilled soups, salad dressings, or semifreddo.” In early spring, Cooke continues, “I might do a sheep’s milk gnocchi with the fresh curds, while later in the summer or early fall, I’ll use the harder cheeses in things like an oven-roasted tomato tart with escargot.”

The farm was started in 1940 by the Lasier family, but it was not until 1976, when restaurateurs Kreis and Sandy Beall bought Blackberry, that the place became a small country inn. Their son Sam, now 33, was born in the main house, which is now the restaurant of the same name.

Since 2001, Sam Beall has been the proprietor of Blackberry, as well as the innovator behind its wine and culinary education programs, which feature world-renowned chefs and winemakers. But he is quick to point out that his entire staff makes the farm a special destination. The cheesemaking, he adds, is an expression of the place: “We want our guests to experience the connection of seeing the sheep, helping with milking and cheesemaking, and then eating it—all in the same day.” Beall says Blackberry’s cheese program is so popular that they now offer several programs for guests (as well as for the general public; see sidebar for details) in the cooking school located within The Barn. Cooke does classes on cheese-driven seasonal menus, while Spannaus teaches a Cheesemaker 101 class and conducts farm and creamery tours, cave tours, and cheese tastings. He also directs the “A Day in the Life of a Cheesemaker” program, in which visitors can milk sheep and assist him as he works.

Soft-spoken and methodical, the bespectacled cheesemaker has an impressive culinary résumé that includes a post as sous chef at Manhattan’s Aureole, as well as at the late 71 Clinton. He began working in kitchens while obtaining a music degree but fell in love with food, which led him to pursue a second degree at the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago. Though he sourced cheese for his sous chef positions, Spannaus’s only formal cheese-

making experience was at Cato Corner, a Connecticut cow dairy where he worked in between gigs as a weekend private chef. He also worked briefly at Brooklyn’s well-regarded Bedford Cheese Shop. What led him away from the high-stress, fast-paced, 80-hour weeks in the kitchen was a desire to “slow down, focus on technique, and create a consistently excellent product.”

That desire appears to be coming to fruition. Just this past summer, Spannaus’s signature cheese, Blackberry Farm’s Singing Brook—an unpasteurized, boule-shaped Pecorino—won third place in the aged sheep’s milk category at the American Cheese Society’s Annual Conference and Competition. The accolade is especially remarkable given that Spannaus has only been at Blackberry since January 2009, and that this is his first time as a solo cheesemaker. “Adam is brilliant,” says Cooke. “Since he took over, the cheese program has grown by leaps and bounds. I think what he does here will be heavily influential on the regional cuisine.”

One can easily imagine Spannaus saying the same thing about Cooke’s work. Given their combined talents and the resources at the farm, it’s no surprise that Blackberry has garnered a reputation far beyond its Great Smoky Mountain borders. As Beall proudly says of his team, “It’s so much better to invest [your energies] in good, honest, passionate people. Give them the tools to do their jobs, and let them run with it.”

GETTING THERE:

Knoxville’s McGhee Tyson airport is 18 miles southeast of Blackberry Farm. There is no shuttle service, but Blackberry will arrange transfers by prior reservation, at separate cost. There are a number of taxi companies (charging approximately \$100 round-trip), but our pick is Green Car and Courier, which uses E-85 ethanol or propane-run town cars and minivans: knoxvillegreencar.com.

Day visitors may also sign up for a cheese tasting and creamery tour, or the “A Day in the



Cheesemaker Adam Spannaus testing his aged sheep’s milk cheese



Life of a Cheesemaker” program with a dinner reservation at The Barn. For reservations or overnight guest stays, call 865.273.6004.

The Blackberry Farm Cookbook: Four Seasons of Great Food and the Good Life (Clarkson Potter) by Sam Beall debuted in October 2009 and can be ordered through the farm’s website.



SERVES 8 TO 10

- 1 Vidalia onion, finely diced
- 4 ounces clarified unsalted butter
- 4 ounces unsalted butter
- $\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ cup all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ gallon whole milk
- 6 cups heavy cream
- 2 pounds grated Singing Brook cheese, or substitute Pecorino Romano or Tomme
- 3 teaspoons dry mustard
- 1 teaspoon nutmeg
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 3 pounds cooked macaroni, drained
- 2 cups fresh bread crumbs
- 3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh thyme
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh rosemary
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup melted unsalted butter (not clarified)

Baked Singing Brook Cheese and Macaroni

Created by Chef Feathers, this is a indulgently rich take on a much-loved Southern classic.

- Heat the oven to 300°F. In a stockpot, sauté the onion in the clarified butter over medium heat. Add the solid, unsalted butter and melt. Whisk in the flour to make a roux, and cook, stirring constantly, for 5 minutes. Whisk in the milk and cream, and gradually bring the mixture to a simmer, stirring constantly.
- When the mixture has started to thicken, add the grated cheese, dry mustard, and nutmeg, whisking to melt the cheese into the sauce. Season to taste with salt and pepper, and strain the sauce through a fine-mesh strainer or chinois.
- Add the cooked macaroni to the sauce and mix to combine. Spoon the mixture into a greased 13- by 9-inch baking dish.
- Mix the bread crumbs, herbs, and melted butter in a medium bowl to make a topping. Sprinkle an even coating on top of the macaroni, and bake until golden brown and bubbly around the edges, approximately 30 minutes, checking after 20.

CHEATS: Purchase premade fresh bread crumbs from your local bakery, grocer, or specialty foods shop.

DO-AHEAD: Cook the macaroni and grate the cheese up to a day ahead.



Parsley Root Soup with Singing Brook Cheese Toast and Escargots

At The Barn, Chef Cooke uses fresh parsley root from the garden, for its fresh, bright flavor and silky consistency when pureed. You can substitute parsnips with similar results. Cooke likes wild Burgundian escargots, but you can use any canned variety or substitute wild mushrooms such as morels, chanterelles, and hen of the woods for a vegetarian variation.

SERVES 6 AS A FIRST COURSE

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 large white onion, diced
- 1 head garlic, separated into cloves, peeled, and minced
- 3 pounds parsley root or parsnip, peeled and diced
- 10 ounces (2½ sticks) unsalted butter
- 2 quarts whole milk
- 1 crusty, good-quality fresh baguette
- 1 shallot, minced
- One 28-ounce can escargot
- 1 bunch Italian parsley, finely chopped
- 1 bunch chives, finely minced
- 1 lemon, halved
- Kosher salt, to taste
- ¼ pound Singing Brook cheese, or substitute a good-quality Pecorino
- Extra-virgin olive oil, for garnish
- Ground Espelette, Aleppo, or cayenne pepper, for garnish

► **THE SOUP:** In a stockpot, heat the olive oil. Add the onion and half of the garlic, and sauté until very tender. Add the parsley root and 4 ounces (one stick) of the butter to the pot; cook for 10 minutes over medium-low heat, until the parsley root is tender when pierced with the tip of a knife. Add enough milk to cover the parsley root, and cook until soft, about 45 minutes. Puree in a blender in batches, adding another 4 ounces of butter and the salt, to taste. Set aside.

► **THE TOAST:** Slice the bread to desired thickness, drizzle with the olive oil, and toast lightly in a 350°F oven. Set aside.

► **THE ESCARGOT:** Heat a sauté pan over medium-high heat,

and add a drizzle of olive oil. Add the shallot, the remaining minced garlic, the escargot, and 2 ounces (4 tablespoons) butter to pan; heat through. Warm the escargot in the butter mixture. Add the parsley and chives at the last minute with a squeeze of lemon juice, and season to taste with salt.

► To serve, place five escargot on top of each toast (reserving the butter in the pan), and grate the cheese over the escargot. Warm in an oven or broiler until the cheese is melted. Warm the soup, and garnish with extra-virgin olive oil and a dusting of powered Espelette pepper. Drizzle the reserved escargot butter over the toasts; serve on the side.

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Salad Greens with Roasted Pears, Toasted Cornbread Croutons, and Violet Cheese Dressing

Blackberry Farm's corporate chef Josh Feathers likes to use red-skinned Bartlett pears for this recipe—their slightly firmer texture adds contrast to the other components. If they are unavailable, any crisp variety such as D'Anjou or Comice will do. But be sure they are ripe, or they will taste too astringent and not caramelize properly. For the best results, he also recommends making your own cornbread, although a good-quality store-bought brand will also work.

SERVES 8

ROASTED PEARS:

- 6 ripe (but not mushy) pears, peeled, cored, and sliced into 8 wedges
- Kosher salt and cracked black pepper, to taste
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup grapeseed oil

VIOLET CHEESE DRESSING:

- 2 wheels (3 to 4 ounces total) of Violet cheese, or substitute Camembert, cut into chunks, with rind
- 4 tablespoons good-quality, pectin-free plain yogurt such as Pavel's or Nancy's
- 3 tablespoons Banyuls vinegar or Champagne vinegar
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 2 cups grapeseed oil
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup water
- Kosher salt, to taste

- 10 cups mixed greens, such as frisée, Lolla Rosa, red leaf, Bibb, arugula, and radicchio
- 2 cups cornbread croutons (see Cheats below)
- Sliced Violet cheese (or Camembert) for plating

► **THE ROASTED PEARS:** Preheat a cast-iron skillet or heavy baking sheet in a 475°F oven. Toss the pears with the salt, pepper, and $\frac{1}{3}$ of the oil. Once the oven is hot, work in batches, adding a light drizzle of oil to the pan and laying enough pear wedges, flat side down, to cover the surface of the pan. Roast in the oven for 2 minutes, then flip the pears over and roast 1 minute longer or until soft.

► **THE DRESSING:** Place the cheese, yogurt, vinegar, and mustard in a blender; puree until smooth. Slowly drizzle in the grapeseed oil, blending until well mixed. Adjust the consistency with the water as needed, and add salt to taste.

► To serve, in a large bowl, toss the greens with just enough dressing to lightly coat the

leaves. (You will have some dressing left over; store in refrigerator.) Divide the greens and croutons among eight plates; top each with six roasted pear wedges and a slice of cheese.

CHEATS: Purchase cornbread and make your own croutons, or buy premade ones from your local bakery or specialty foods store. If you can't find cornbread, a good-quality sourdough bread will also work. For a cornbread recipe from Chef Feathers of Blackberry

Farm and how to make croutons, go to culturecheesemag.com.

DO-AHEAD: The dressing can be made several days in advance and stored in the refrigerator. Let it sit at room temperature for one hour before serving. Make the croutons a day ahead, and store in an airtight container.

CHEESES FROM BLACKBERRY FARM



- **VIOLET:** A pasteurized Camembert style, its bloomy rind is produced with *P. candidum* and tastes faintly mushroomy. Aged 21 to 24 days, with a velvety, rich interior and floral notes.
- **BREBIS:** A fresh, slightly sweet, versatile cheese similar to chèvre, but without any chalkiness, owing to its higher fat content.

- **SINGING BROOK:** Aged for a minimum of 120 days, this Pecorino style is spectacular, with a full, hazelnut-buttery richness and medium-soft paste. Longer-aged versions are slightly firmer, with some crystallization.
- **TREFOIL:** A pasteurized, semisoft, washed-rind Reblochon style aged for 30 to 40 days. Slightly pungent

and salty, with notes of hay and wildflowers.

- **BLACKBERRY BLUE:** Debuted December 2009; mild, creamy, and slightly earthy, with hints of mineral.

All of Blackberry Farm's cheeses can be ordered online, depending on availability, at blackberryfarm.com.



Joseph Lenn, Blackberry's chef de cuisine, serves this simple but nuanced dish as both a course on tasting menus and an accompaniment to entrées or a family-style side dish. He uses Princess LaRatte, Pontiac, or Kennebec potatoes grown on the farm, but any fingerling variety or red bliss potato will work. If you prefer an aged cheese, Lenn suggests using a microplane to grate Parmigiano-Reggiano over the final dish.

Wood-Roasted New Crop Potatoes with Trefoil Cheese and Black Truffle Oil

SERVES 4 AS A SIDE DISH

- 12 new potatoes, approximately golf-ball-size, gently scrubbed to remove dirt
- 1 ounce grapeseed oil (available at most grocery stores and specialty foods shops)
- 1½ teaspoons kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 4 ounces Trefoil cheese, sliced thin, or substitute crème fraîche
- 2 tablespoons finely minced chives
- Black truffle oil, to taste

- Heat a wood, charcoal, or gas grill (Lenn uses a Komodo ceramic barbecue grill) until the coals are glowing and temperature is about 450°F. In a mixing bowl, combine the potatoes, grapeseed oil, and salt, and toss the potatoes to coat.
- Place the potatoes on the grill and cook until tender, 30 to 45 minutes. Remove from the grill, and place on a serving platter. Smash each potato with the back of a spoon, then season with pepper. Place the sliced Trefoil cheese over the top of the potatoes, allowing it to melt slightly. Garnish with chives and a drizzle of truffle oil. Serve immediately.

CHEATS: Use any good-quality aged cheese of your choosing. A washed-rind in the style of Reblochon is most similar to Trefoil. **C**

Laurel Miller is a food and travel writer and cooking instructor based in California and Colorado.

For a recipe for Blackberry Farm's Persimmon Jelly (great to serve with blue cheese), go to culturecheesemag.com.




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