

from FARM to TABLE

Fresh Produce in the Mennonite Shenandoah Valley

THE MORNING HAZE FROM THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS STILL HANGS over the fields of cut corn as the auctioneer steps up between the mounds of pumpkins, apples, and watermelons. The Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction, LLC, located in Dayton, Virginia, in the heart of Virginia's Mennonite farming community, gears up for another day.

The crowd consists of all orders of Mennonites. Some men wear the traditional straw hats and suspenders and the women, soft-colored calicos with the requisite head coverings. Others are more inconspicuous in their dress. Some buyers are from local restaurants, farm stands, and grocery stores. Indeed, many of the most successful restaurants in the area get their produce here—Mrs. Rowe's Restaurant and Bakery, Staunton; The Thomas House, Dayton; and the Joshua Wilton House, Harrisonburg.

"We've found some of the best buys and really good fresh produce there. You can't beat it," says Mike DiGrassie, general manager and owner of Mrs. Rowe's Restaurant and Bakery.

BY MOLLIE COX BRYAN / RECIPES EXCERPTED FROM *MENNONITE COUNTRY-STYLE RECIPES AND KITCHEN SECRETS* BY
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But not all are wholesale buyers. Locals scan the produce and make bargains with their friends. Shirley Yoder of Dayton is one of those who came with a friend to split some produce. She wants green beans and the already-shucked lima beans. She points to an odd-looking 10-inch, flat green bean and says, "I cut these up and cook 'em with ham hock." The handwritten tag says these are Northeastern beans.

It's September, and although the growing season is winding down, the produce is still beautiful. Large pumpkins, bunches of Indian corn, and knobby squash line the stalls, along with the regular produce items—some still have dew on them.

"I'd say about 75 percent of the produce here is grown by Mennonites," says auction employee Linden Wenger, "but I want to make it clear that we are here for the whole community."


The Shenandoah Valley Auction began three years ago in response to the huge demand for local produce sweeping the nation. It has made a big impact on the local farming community, as well.

"There are still some Amish and Mennonites who are still using horse and plow," says Linden, "but most of us here do use tractors."

When the word *Mennonite* is used, often people think of horses and buggies and men dressed in black with straw hats. The Shenandoah Valley of Virginia is home to these Mennonites. But the religion has several branches—and many Mennonites who live in the valley drive cars, hold 9-to-5 jobs, and dress inconspicuously. Virginia has 65 Mennonite congregations, and the South is scattered with them. These run the gamut from the conservative to the more modern, but all share a common call to a simple life.

And living a simple life can take many forms. For the farmers in Dayton, it's keeping their families together on the farm and serving the community by providing healthy, locally grown produce.

"The first year, we rented a small farm stand and quickly outgrew it. In the second year, we built this market building and grew 118 percent," Linden says with a smile. "Recently, we've had some interest from chain stores and school cafeterias." The chains are so used to getting produce from far-off places, he explains, they have forgotten that you can't get a local tomato in the winter in Virginia—unless it's grown in a hothouse.

But in the summer, Virginia's gardens and fields are burgeoning with tomatoes. Gardeners and consumers across the state await their perfectly ripened glory, as well as that of so much of the area's produce, such as corn, squash, and beans. And now the Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction is stepping in to provide one successful option for moving local fresh produce from farm to table. 



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The Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction is located in Dayton, Virginia. It is open Tuesdays and Fridays from April through October, from 9:30 a.m. until the produce is gone. For more information, call 540-879-2211.



buttermilk-baked chicken

Yield: 4 to 6 servings
Preparation: 20 minutes
Bake: 1 hour 50 minutes

- 1/4 cup butter
- 1 young chicken, cut into 8 or 9 pieces
- 1 cup thick sour milk or buttermilk
- 1 to 1 1/2 cups cornflake crumbs
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- 1/2 teaspoon monosodium glutamate (MSG), optional
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon garlic salt

PREHEAT oven to 350°.

MELT butter in a 13-x-9-x-2-inch baking dish.

DIP chicken pieces in milk or buttermilk, then in crumbs. Place in baking dish, skin side down. Sprinkle thyme, paprika, MSG, salt, and garlic salt over chicken. Cover loosely with foil.

BAKE for 1 to 1 1/2 hours, depending on tenderness of chicken.

REMOVE foil, turn chicken pieces, and bake, uncovered, for 20 minutes longer.

baked cabbage

Yield: 6 servings
Preparation: 20 minutes
Cook: 10 minutes
Bake: 35 minutes

- 1 medium head cabbage, cut into 3/4-inch-thick wedges
- 1 cup chopped corned beef, ham, or crumbled bacon
- 1/3 cup butter
- 1/3 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 cups milk
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/2 to 1 cup shredded Cheddar cheese

PREHEAT oven to 350°. Lightly grease a 2-quart casserole or a 12-x-8-x-2-inch baking dish; set aside.

COOK cabbage in boiling water for 10 minutes. Drain and place in prepared dish. Sprinkle corned beef, ham, or bacon over top.

IN A SAUCEPAN, melt butter over medium heat. Add flour, stirring until smooth and bubbly. Slowly add milk, stirring constantly, until sauce is thickened and smooth. (Remove pan from heat, if necessary, while adding

milk to help avoid lumps. Return pan to heat until mixture is smooth and bubbly.) Pour sauce over cabbage. Sprinkle cheese over top.
BAKE for 30 to 35 minutes.

orange-spiced carrots

Yield: 4 to 5 servings
Preparation: 10 minutes
Cook: 15 minutes

- 1 pound carrots (approximately 8 medium carrots), cut into slices
- 1/4 cup orange juice
- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 dash ground nutmeg
- 1 tablespoon butter

IN A SAUCEPAN, cook carrots in a small amount of water over medium heat until tender. Drain. (Save cooking liquid for another purpose, if desired.)

IN A SMALL BOWL, combine orange juice, cornstarch, sugar, salt, ginger, and nutmeg. Add to carrots, stirring until slightly thickened. Stir in butter.

cornbread puff

Yield: 9 servings
Preparation: 15 minutes
Bake: 35 minutes

- 1/2 cup butter, softened
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup yellow cornmeal
- 1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup milk

PREHEAT oven to 350°. Grease a 9-inch square cake pan; set aside.

IN A LARGE BOWL, beat butter and sugar at medium speed with an electric mixer. Add eggs, beating well.

IN ANOTHER BOWL, combine cornmeal, flour, baking powder, and salt. Add to butter mixture alternately with milk, beginning and ending with flour. Pour batter into prepared pan.

BAKE for 35 minutes. Let cool in pan for 10 minutes. Invert onto a serving plate and cut into squares.



This sweet cornbread variation is mixed together more like a cake than traditional cornbread, but the results are delicious.

“We Mennonites tend to give priority to good home-style cooking, to using what we have on hand, to sitting down together as families at mealtimes, and to entertaining guests for meals.”

—ESTHER SHANK, AUTHOR OF
MENNONITE COUNTRY-STYLE RECIPES
AND KITCHEN SECRETS

apple-dapple cake

Yield: 12 servings
Preparation: 15 minutes
Bake: 1 hour 10 minutes

- 3 large eggs
- 1 1/4 cups vegetable oil
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 2 cups sugar
- 3 cups all-purpose flour, divided
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 3 cups chopped apples
- 1 cup chopped pecans or walnuts
- 1 cup sweetened flaked coconut

Topping:

- 1/3 cup butter
- 1 cup firmly packed brown sugar
- 1/4 cup milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

PREHEAT oven to 350°. Grease a 9-inch tube pan or a Bundt pan; set aside.*

IN A LARGE BOWL, beat eggs with an electric mixer, mixing well. Add oil, vanilla, and sugar, beating well.

IN ANOTHER BOWL, sift together 2 3/4 cups flour, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Add to egg mixture.

COMBINE remaining 1/4 cup flour with apples, nuts, and coconut. Fold fruit mixture into cake batter. Pour into prepared pan.

BAKE for approximately 1 hour 10 minutes. Remove from oven and let sit for 5 minutes. Remove cake from pan.

MEANWHILE, combine topping ingredients in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Boil for 2 or 3 minutes. Pour hot topping over warm cake.

*This recipe may also be baked in a 13-x-9-x-2-inch baking dish plus a 9-x-5-inch loaf pan for 40 to 45 minutes. (There is too much batter for a 13-x-9-x-2-inch pan only.)





When the first of Esther Shank's three daughters left home, Esther wondered how well she had equipped her for life on her own, so she compiled favorite recipes and helpful hints for her girls. Others found out about Esther's project, and they, too, wanted a copy. The demand was so great, she decided to publish it as *Mennonite Country-Style Recipes and Kitchen Secrets*. To order a copy of the book, contact Herald Press at 1-800-245-7894, ext. 278.

Esther's mother hand-pieced quilts for each of Esther's daughters. She made the one shown above for her granddaughter Nancy Moore.

peanut-butter cake

Yield: 12 servings

Preparation: 10 minutes

Bake: 30 minutes

- 1/4 cup butter, softened
- 1/4 cup peanut butter
- 1 1/2 cups firmly packed brown sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 1/2 cup warm water
- 1 cup thick sour milk or buttermilk
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking soda

PREHEAT oven to 350°. Grease and flour 2 (9-inch) round cake pans or 1 (13-x-9-x-2-inch) cake pan; set aside.

IN A LARGE BOWL, combine all ingredients. Beat on low speed with an electric mixer for 1 minute, scraping bowl frequently. Increase speed to medium-high and continue beating for 2 minutes. Pour batter into prepared pans.

BAKE for 25 to 30 minutes. Let layers cool in pans for 10 minutes. Remove from pan and cool completely on a baking rack.

FROST cake with Chocolate-Peanut-Butter Frosting.

chocolate-peanut-butter frosting

Yield: approximately 2 1/2 cups

Preparation: 5 minutes

- 1 (1-ounce) square unsweetened chocolate, melted
- 2 tablespoons butter, softened
- 2 tablespoons peanut butter
- 2 cups confectioners' sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 3 or 4 tablespoons milk

IN A LARGE BOWL, combine all ingredients and beat on medium speed with an electric mixer until thick and creamy.