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# GETTING TO KNOW KERRY DUNNINGTON

BY KATHY LALLY

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Kerry Dunnington had beets on her mind. It was that time of year, and when Kerry cooks, she wants food produced locally and in season.

She had been working on coconut ginger beet ice cream. “It was a little woodsy,” she said, “but surprisingly good.”

Trying to perfect it meant cooking beets, of course, and cooking beets meant pots of beet water. This is where you find a key to Kerry’s cooking. Don’t waste. Repurpose. It’s a philosophy that has informed all three of her cookbooks, including *The Seasonal Kitchen* published in September.

“My mother was a fabulous cook,” Kerry said as we talked in her kitchen in the Lombardy. “She would make us a meal, say, of meat loaf, mashed potatoes and a medley of vegetables, in that era something like peas and carrots. She would take the potato water, the peas and carrot water, and she would use that as the basis for a pot of soup.

“I honestly think that’s where my imagination comes from. If carrots are in a dish, why not parsnips? That’s how I build new ideas. That’s my favorite part – to stretch the idea boundaries.”

Kerry used beet water to cook risotto, which turned a rich burgundy and served as an inviting bed for sea bass. Beet greens and slivers of stems garnished the dish.

Visual appeal is important to her, something that has been reinforced by the experience of a friend who took a fall, hit her head and lost her sense of taste and smell. “She eats with her eyes,” Kerry said.

Kerry and her husband and chief taste tester Nick moved into the Lombardy in 1986 and their kitchen probably dates from the early 80’s. It’s small, spare and triangular. She can stand in one spot and touch her refrigerator, sink, workspace and dishwasher. The stove is only a few steps away. “I just love this kitchen,” Kerry said.



*Kerry's risotto cooked in beet water, and sea bass topped with beet greens and beet stems in keeping with her mother's philosophy of no waste with great taste.*

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Don't look for fancy tools. Kerry has a Kitchen Aid mixer, a Cuisinart food processor that she just bought to replace the one inherited from her mother, a toaster oven, pots, cast iron frying pans and a food scale. Utensils include her great grandmother's mortar and pestle and flowered porcelain juicer, which she uses every day. Her great great grandmother's spoon with sturdy wooden handle and gorgeous metal head is a work of art.

"I am not a gadget cook," she said. "I love a wooden spoon."



*Kerry at age 4 in the kitchen of her family's playhouse with her brother Kraig, 5 1/2.*

Your hands are an important part of cooking, Kerry mused, part of a tradition of milking cows, gathering the harvest, kneading bread, making cheese. "There's something poetic about hands and the outcome."

In this plain spoken kitchen Kerry creates the recipes filling the pages of her books, *Tasting the Seasons*, *This Book Cooks* and now *The Seasonal Kitchen*, where you'll find yourself immersed in a world of Gingered Butternut Squash Soup with Coconut, Maple Dijon Glazed Chicken, Honey-Buttered Peppered Turnips and Sweet Peas, Molasses-Tinged Pumpernickel Raisin Bread and Cardamom-Infused Cranberry Cobbler Cake.

Those are only a few of the newest book's 165 recipes, and if they sound exotic Kerry prides herself on keeping them flavorful but uncomplicated, based on seasonal produce with the addition of foods that cooks traditionally canned or otherwise preserved. That squash soup has easy to find ingredients (powdered ginger, a can of coconut milk and seasonal squash among them), clear directions and a quick time of it in the kitchen.

The chicken? A bird, mustard, maple syrup, rice vinegar and a 450 degree oven. Nick calls the dish "Elemental Pleasures."

Kerry grew up in Ruxton, on Malvern Avenue at Army Road. She was one of five children, and her father, Gordon Leatherman, built them a playhouse that was a replica of the family home. The miniature version of the house, big enough for an adult to stand in, is still there today. Importantly, it had a kitchen where Kerry played with her pots and pans, inspired by her mother, Joan. Kerry is pictured at age 4, busy in the kitchen, while her brother Kraig, 5 ½ at the time, looks on.

Before writing cookbooks – and starting a catering company – Kerry was general manager of the Tremont, a hotel that once was a destination for celebrities visiting Baltimore. Fifteen-hour days were the routine, and Kerry remembers arriving at work one morning with a greeting from the cheerful front desk person commenting on the beautiful blooming of the city's cherry trees.

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Kerry had not noticed the cherry trees in her fixation on work. “I wondered what else I was missing,” she said. She quit her job and started thinking about cooking, calling her mother for details of favorite recipes and writing them down in a journal. Eventually, a friend told her she ought to write a cookbook. So she did.

Now she’s busy promoting farmers markets. “I love to educate people about the importance of seasonal eating and keeping it local,” she said. She’s been trying to organize events that will create more foot traffic for the Kenilworth Farmers Market in Towson, which operates Tuesday afternoons from mid-April to November and has lived through some disruption because of the renovation of the Shops at Kenilworth.

“It feels wonderful to support these farmers who work so hard for us,” she said. “They depend on us.”