

Fair Trade

The From Scratch Club brings food swapping to the region's DIY homemakers
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Tequila infused with strawberries and raspberries. Spicy dill pickles. Jalapeño jelly. Peach-raspberry crisp. Granola. Pesto. S'mores. Whoopie pies and a dozen eggs. What's this, a shopping list? Nope. These are the things people brought to All Good Bakers (160 Quail St., Albany) on a sweltering Sunday in July. Brought, mind you, not bought, to trade with each other at a food swap organized by the From Scratch Club.

The latest stage of the DIY food phenomenon, food swaps have been holding American imaginations and kitchens hostage, and have recently arrived in Albany. Evolving in the way that canning arises from gardening—too many tomatoes necessitates learning how to make sauce and salsa—homemade food fans often find they have too much of a good thing and want to trade.

The contemporary genesis can be traced to Brooklyn, where Kate Payne, author of *The Hip Girl's Guide to Homemaking*, wanted to trade some marmalade for some honey. She and the honey maker guessed there were a ton of other food crafters who were likely in the same boat, and hosted a swap. That was in March 2010. Now there are food swaps in major cities and multiple swaps in places with strong foodie-homesteady-gardening vibes, like San Francisco.

Locally, the From Scratch Club, a group of women who blog regularly (fromscratchclub.wordpress.com) and meet up monthly for food-related adventures, held their first food swap on the occasion of Kate Payne's visit this spring. The author was touring her book through house parties and Christina Davis, founder of the group and editor of the blog, invited her to Saratoga Springs. The book party featured a potluck dessert, book signing and the first swap, which was popular enough to warrant repeats. The repeats take place at Common Threads, a knitting store on Beekman Street.

The third event was held on the third Wednesday in July. Jars of candied ginger, kombucha scobies and homemade sour cream sit on tables. Colorful skeins and impossible handknit sweaters serve as background while women scan the swap offerings: jams and hot sauces, English muffins with homemade honey butter, grain-free granola, challah, Asian coleslaw, and whole meals like chicken mole.

At this swap in Saratoga, as well as the one in Albany, participants—who sign up online for a limited number of free tickets—sign into the swap, put on a nametag, and are greeted by Davis. She helps people find a table to display their offerings and shows them how to fill out sheets with some basic ingredient info.

“Really, it's like going to a party where it's everyone's birthday,” wrote Heather Parlato about a food swap in Los Angeles on LAist, a website about the city. A story about the Portland, Ore., swap scene connected bartering to the state's pioneer past. The swaps in this area feel very funky and friendly. Davis lays the ground rules at the start: You don't have to swap for something you don't want. “Put your name down on whatever you want,” she instructs. “They might not want what you have, anyway. Swapping is one for one.”

The Saratoga swap celebrates the birthday of Common Threads owner Ashley Gardner with homemade cupcakes, dotted with blueberries and topped with a swirl of Swiss Meringue buttercream that somehow stands tough and luscious in the heat. Swappers sip sangria and seltzer, and discuss what they've brought.

One woman jokes about swapping anything and everything for a cute guy on TV. In Albany, people snack on a nice spread provided by All Good Bakers Britin and Nick Foster, and chat. Word of the food swaps spread through Twitter and Facebook, leading food friends to sign up and come together. A couple of men are at this swap but most of the crowd are in sundresses and sandals.

Alex Hauptman, a vet assistant, and Nicole Karis, teacher and member of the band Hot Cousin, have done other food swaps on an informal basis and brought some hot commodities to this event: “kickass chocolate pecan pie” and “espresso brownie stacks with cheesecake dipping sauce.”

“I started making a lot of dipping sauces because it’s a great way to glorify food,” said Karis, who hoped that all the brownies wouldn’t swap so she could take some home herself. “When I do things for other people, I try to do things that you wouldn’t do for yourself.”

At a certain point in the swap, all browsing ends and silence descends as people get to work and sign up for what they’d like, leaving a note with what they’d like to trade for. Waiting for the official swapping to begin, the air vibrates with want. There is some reticence in the air, too. Not everyone knows each other, and even if everyone loves food, not everyone will love your food. If a swap is like a birthday party, all the gifts are unwrapped, and everyone covets certain shining presents. The professional baker who brought the pull-apart cinnamon buns is crowded with offers. While not everyone can get the great-great goods, it’s hard to make a bad swap. People fill totebags and baskets with what they’ve traded, and smiles are plenty.

If this whets your appetite, get cooking or canning and sign up online at From Scratch Club for the next swap, which will be Sunday (Aug. 22) from 4-6 PM at All Good Bakers.