

True Blue

Tupelo Honey Café's chef prepares a sweet spread with a bounty of blueberries picked in his backyard

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A bottle of the restaurant's namesake sweetener graces each table at Tupelo Honey Café, one of Asheville's mainstays. It's a delicious accompaniment to the buttermilk biscuits and indicative of the restaurant's Southern hospitality and cuisine. Eclectic twists on classic dishes, such as sweet potato pancakes, goat cheese grits, and wild mushroom meatloaf are the creations of Executive Chef Brian Sonoskus, who's been behind Tupelo's menu since the eatery opened in 2000. Like many restaurants attuned to the farm-to-fork movement, the café has established its own local source for fresh produce—Sonoskus's backyard.

Actually, his yard is a 12-acre farm tucked in a valley near Burnsville. Sunshot Organics is where Sonoskus lives with his fiancée, Kate McDonagh, and their one-year-old son, Jack. The couple grows vegetables and edible flowers, which turn up on plates at the restaurant, and they maintain about a thousand blueberry bushes.

On this summer day, the two are hosting a dinner party for Tupelo Honey staff. It's a celebration of the café's recent opening of a second location in South Asheville. And making good use of the farm's blueberry harvest, the fruit will infuse the evening's menu with juicy sweetness and vibrant color.

Green Acres

A seasoned host, Sonoskus is calm and collected in the hours before guests arrive. The menu has been thoughtfully chosen, and many dishes, like the sweet and spicy blueberry gazpacho, were prepared in advance. Working quickly, he chops onions, celery, and herbs that will go into the candied-ginger corn bread dressing and then sautés them all, filling the kitchen with a savory aroma. A stash of dried blueberries from last year's harvest sits on a nearby counter. These will brighten the flavor of the corn bread, as well as several other dishes. Sonoskus likes the convenience that dehydrated fruit offers. "Dried blueberries are still very sweet, but won't leave a messy stain in the food," he explains.

With the corn bread ready to go into the oven, Sonoskus is able to step away from the kitchen. Buckets in hand, the family heads down the hill to pick fresh berries. "The deep royal blue berries are usually the ripest, but the easiest way to tell is simply to taste," McDonagh says, popping a berry into her mouth before placing one in Jack's outstretched hands.

In the field opposite the blueberry patch are rows of cucumbers, kale, heirloom tomatoes, peppers, squash, and blackberries. “Everything I grow goes to the restaurant,” Sonoskus says as he stoops to pick Swiss chard for a salad. The berries are the exception, with only a small percentage of his crop going to the café. The majority are plucked by visitors to the farm during U-pick season, mid-July through October.

Managing a small farm and heading up a bustling restaurant are ambitious endeavors, but Sonoskus knows his limits. “I buy from other local farmers to supplement what I can’t provide.” His produce winds up on the menu, mainly in specials. “Green zebra tomatoes added a tart punch to a caprice salad special we ran recently,” he says. And he’s looking forward to making good use of the candy roaster squash come fall. “It’s hard work,” he says about growing his own food, “but the reward is great. The compliments keep me going.”

Fruits of Labor

Back at the house, McDonagh is on the deck adding the finishing touches to the table. Drawing on her background as a server at Tupelo Honey, which is where she and Sonoskus met, she creates an elegant spread. Vases brimming with colorful wildflowers reflect the scenic country setting.

Inside, a mouth-watering aroma lingers in the air. Sonoskus has returned from the fields, and is simmering blueberry sausage balls made with Hickory Nut Gap pork in maple syrup. These appetizers will disappear quickly once guests arrive.

And one by one, guests trickle in, making their ways up the dirt road to the farmhouse, with beer and wine in hand. Hugs and congratulations go around, as many are co-workers who have recently received promotions due to the new location. And none are shy to pitch in and help the chef.

Kelly Hanlon is on beverage duty, making blueberry champagne cocktails. The effervescent Korbel Brut blended with blueberry sauce is a sweet complement to the salad of chopped greens, dried blueberries, roasted beets, carrots, goat cheese, sunflower seeds, and sherry vinaigrette.

Between sips of champagne, Sonoskus readies the blueberry-port reduction that will go over the flank steak. The steak has been marinating overnight in a sauce of smoked chipotle peppers, spices, orange marmalade, Tupelo honey, orange juice, and V8. “The key to cooking with a sweet ingredient, like blueberries, is to pair it with something savory,” Sonoskus explains. “And I recommend using a combination of fresh and dried berries. Fresh berries are more tart, so use those when you don’t want the sweetness to come through as much.”

Cooking dinner for family and friends is an opportunity for Sonoskus to experiment with new flavor combinations and recipes. And his staff is always happy to be his taste-testers. “He plays around with recipes and brings them into the restaurant for us to try,” says Chef de Cuisine Jamie White. “He’s taught me a lot.” Outside, Tupelo Honey Café owner Steve Frabitore lights the grill. “Brian knows how

to treat food right,” he says. “The flavors of his dishes combine nicely, but can still be deciphered individually.” With the steaks on the grill, Sonoskus hands over the cooking to White and joins the dinner party. A toast to success and good food commences the meal, which is opened with the gazpacho and salad, followed by the steak. The candied-ginger corn bread dressing, side of sautéed asparagus, and PETS Petite Sirah are excellent accompaniments to a main course that presents a harmonious balance of sweet and savory.

Capping the dinner, Sonoskus has prepared a delicious blueberry granola crisp served à la mode. It’s a refreshing take on traditional cobbler, and the perfect ending to a sweet day down on the farm.

Blueberry-Maple Pork Sausage Balls

Servings: 8

Ingredients:

1 lb. pork breakfast sausage
3 oz. dried blueberries
½ cup maple syrup

Directions:

In a bowl, mix sausage and blueberries. Roll into one ounce balls (yields about 20). Cook sausage balls in a skillet over medium heat, about seven minutes, turning frequently to brown. Drain grease. Add maple syrup and bring to a simmer, continuing to cook for one minute. Remove sausage balls and place on a serving plate. Strain the syrup and pour over sausage.

Blueberry Gazpacho

Servings: 8

Ingredients:

2 cucumbers, peeled, seeded & diced	1 jalapeño pepper, seeded & minced
1 green tomato, diced	2 Tbs. cilantro, minced
1 red tomato, diced	2 cups V8 juice
1 bell pepper, seeded & diced	2 cups orange juice
1 poblano pepper, seeded & diced	2 cups blueberries
	1 Tbs. lime juice
	Salt & pepper, to taste

Directions:

Combine all ingredients in a large bowl, mix thoroughly, and refrigerate for two hours. Serve chilled.

Chipotle-Marinated Flank Steak

Servings: 8

Ingredients:

4 lbs. flank steak, cleaned & trimmed
2 pts. smoked chipotle sauce

Smoked Chipotle Sauce

(YieldS 2 pints)

5 oz. smoked chipotle peppers

4 oz. orange marmalade

6 oz. Tupelo honey

8 oz. orange juice

8 oz. V8 juice

1 Tbs. chili powder

1 Tbs. cumin

1 ½ tsp. coriander

¼ tsp. salt

1 Tbs. cornstarch

2 Tbs. water

Half a lime, juiced

1 Tbs. fresh cilantro, minced

Directions:

Clean and trim the steak. Place in a dish, cover with one pint of sauce (reserve the rest for grilling), and marinate in the refrigerator overnight. Fire the grill and cook steak to desired temperature, brushing with the reserved chipotle sauce.

Smoked Chipotle Sauce

In a heavy pot, combine peppers, marmalade, honey, orange juice, V8, chili powder, cumin,

Blueberry Sauce

(Yields 2 pints)

Ingredients:

7 oz. sugar
2 tsp. pectin
1 lb. 6 oz. blueberries
2½ tsp. lemon juice

Directions:

In a bowl, combine sugar and pectin, and stir until well blended. Place blueberries in a thick-bottomed pot. Stir in sugar-pectin mixture, and add lemon juice. Cook over high heat for 35 minutes, stirring every couple of minutes. Sauce should reach a medium-thick consistency. Note: Sauce can be prepared in advance to be used in the champagne cocktail or blueberry-port reduction.

Blueberry Champagne Cocktail

(Makes one drink)

Ingredients:

6 oz. champagne
2 oz. blueberry sauce

Directions:

Pour champagne into a flute and top with blueberry sauce. Note: Adding the sauce will agitate the champagne. Minimize bubbles by pouring champagne in a carafe first.

Blueberry-Port Reduction

Servings: 8

Ingredients:

4 cups port
1 large shallot, minced
4 oz. blueberry sauce
Salt & pepper, to taste

Directions:

In a sauce pot, simmer port and shallot over medium heat until liquid is reduced by half. Add blueberry sauce and keep over medium heat until reduced by one-third. Season with salt and pepper. Reserve for serving with steak.

Candied-ginger Cornbread Dressing

(Serves 8-10)

Ingredients:

Cornbread

3½ cups yellow, self-rising cornbread
½ cup butter, melted
1½ cups whole milk
¼ cup heavy cream
3 eggs, beaten

Dressing

1 cup fresh ginger, peeled & sliced
1 cup water
½ cup sugar
4 tsp. butter
2 cups sweet onion, diced
8 oz. cremini mushrooms, quartered
2 cups celery, sliced thin
2 cups dried blueberries
1 tsp. sea salt
1 tsp. fresh ground black pepper
1 Tbs. fresh sage, minced
1 Tbs. fresh parsley, minced
A batch of buttery cornbread or 2 lb. package seasoned cornbread mix
28 oz. chicken stock
4 Tbs. butter, melted

Directions:

Cornbread

Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease a nine-by-13-inch glass baking dish. Place all ingredients in a bowl, and whisk until combined. Pour into dish and bake for 35 to 40 minutes, until firm to the touch.

Dressing

Preheat oven to 350°F. In a pot, combine ginger, water, and sugar, and cook on high until water has evaporated and ginger is caramelized. Remove ginger, allow to cool, and dice. In a sauté pan, add four teaspoons of butter, onions, mushrooms, celery, and dried blueberries. Cook for three to four minutes until onions are translucent. Mix all ingredients except melted butter in a large bowl until well combined.

Pour cornbread mix into a nine-by-13-inch glass baking dish and cook uncovered for 30 minutes. Cornbread should be firm to the touch when done. Drizzle with four tablespoons of melted butter.

Blueberry Granola Crisp

Servings: 6

Ingredients:

Granola

½ cup canola oil
1 cup maple syrup
2 tsp. vanilla extract
6 cups old fashioned rolled oats
1 cup sunflower seeds
1 ½ cups almonds, sliced
1 Tbs. cinnamon
1 cup dried apples, diced
½ cup coconut flakes, toasted

Crisp

14 cups blueberries
1 cup sugar
2½ Tbs. flour
2 tsp. vanilla
2 Tbs. molasses
1 tsp. nutmeg
1 tsp. cinnamon
1 tsp. sea salt
Granola

Directions:

Granola

Preheat oven to 300°F. In a small sauce pot, combine oil and syrup, and bring to a boil. Remove from heat and add vanilla. In a bowl, combine oats, seeds, almonds, and cinnamon and mix well. Drizzle the oil/syrup mixture over the dry mix and combine. Spread evenly on a baking sheet and bake for 30 to 40 minutes, until toasted. Note: To ensure it's done, taste the almonds. They should be crisp, not chewy. Add dried apples and coconut flakes, and set aside to cool.

Crisp

Preheat oven to 350°F. In a bowl, combine all ingredients except granola and place in a nine-by-13-inch glass dish. Cook for 45 minutes. Top with granola and cook for 10 minutes. Cool to room temperature, and serve à la mode.

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