

# A taste of island tradition

Raised amid the culinary bounty of Prince Edward Island, chef Jeff McCourt pays tribute to the flavours of home



L to R: Austin Clement, Jeff McCourt and Allan Williams

## Digger fried clams with chunky dill pickle mayonnaise



**P**.E.I.-born chef and cookbook author Jeff McCourt had planned on becoming a veterinarian – but he just couldn't get out of the kitchen. "That's what I thought I wanted to do, but in my last year at high school, I didn't see myself in university for another seven years. I'm a hands-on kind of guy. I was always my mother's number one assistant in the kitchen," says Jeff. So

### INGREDIENTS serves 8

#### DILL PICKLE MAYONNAISE

- 1½ cups mayonnaise (full-fat)
- 3 medium dill pickles (dried with a towel, small dice)
- 2 tbsp Frank's RedHot Chile 'n Lime Hot Sauce (or your favourite hot sauce)
- 2 tbsp lemon juice
- salt and pepper

#### CLAMS

- 1 cup water
- 4 lb steamer clams (washed free of any sand)
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tsp dried basil
- 1 tbsp freshly cracked black pepper
- 1 tsp salt
- 3 eggs
- 3 cups 2% milk
- 4 cups fine dried breadcrumbs

- 1 For the mayonnaise, combine the mayonnaise and pickles. Add the hot sauce and lemon juice and mix well. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Refrigerate until ready to serve. This will keep for up to 5 days.
- 2 Place the water and clams in a pot and steam the clams for about 6 minutes, or until the meat easily pulls away from the shell. Remove the meat, making sure to remove the tough outer skin from the tongue. Pat dry and set aside.
- 3 To make a pre-dust, combine the flour, basil, pepper and salt and mix well. Put this pre-dust on a plate and set aside.
- 4 Make an egg wash by whisking together the eggs and milk in a small stainless steel bowl. Set this aside. Roll each clam in pre-dust, dip in the egg wash to coat, then roll in the breadcrumbs and lay on paper towel.
- 5 Preheat a deep fryer filled with oil to 375° F. If you don't have a deep fryer, you can use a large saucepan of oil, but you need to be very careful if you use this method – the oil shouldn't be more than halfway up the sides of the pot. Submerge the clams slowly.
- 6 Fry the breaded clams in batches until golden brown, about 1 minute. Remove the clams from the fryer and place them on paper towels to drain off any excess oil.
- 7 Serve with the mayonnaise and lemon wedges.



## P.E.I. pulled pork sandwich

at 18, he turned down a scholarship to university and accepted a spot at the highly esteemed Culinary Institute of Canada in Charlottetown. Twenty-one years later, he's still in the kitchen – and as vice-president of the P.E.I. Association of Chefs and Cooks, he's an enthusiastic ambassador for the Island's vivacious food culture. These days, Jeff, 38, has two little assistants of his own – son Finn, 5, and daughter Molly, 2. He's also co-author of *Flavours of Prince Edward Island: A Culinary Journey* (Whitecap), with fellow foodies Allan Williams and Austin Clement, a book that conveys his devotion to the bounty of his home province. In P.E.I., as Jeff explains to *Hello! Canada*, produce is often grown

down the road, and freshly caught fish are dropped off at the local harbour – the ideal environment for a kid with a passion for food. Jeff's earliest exposure to local cooking came during visits to his grandmother's home in Emerald, P.E.I. "I remember picking blueberries along the railway tracks – now the Confederation Trail – behind my grandparents' farmhouse," he says. "My grandmother would give me an empty two-quart ice-cream container, and basically it had to be filled so that she could make two blueberry pies. She was a nice lady, but all about business and getting the job done." His grandmother's pies were renowned. "I loved them so much that I would ask for a pie instead of a ▶

### INGREDIENTS serves 6

#### PORK

- 3 lb boneless pork shoulder salt and pepper
- 2 large Spanish onions, cut in medium slices
- 1 head garlic, chopped

#### BARBECUE SAUCE

- 6 cups ketchup
- 2 cups balsamic vinegar
- 2 cups brown sugar, packed
- 1 cup diced onion
- ¼ cup hickory smoke seasoning
- 2 tbsp minced garlic
- 1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce
- 2 tsp Tabasco sauce
- salt and pepper

- 1 Preheat the oven to 400° F.
- 2 Season the pork shoulder with salt and pepper. Place the onions and garlic in a roasting pan and sit the pork shoulder on top. Roast in the oven for 30 minutes to brown the pork and vegetables.
- 3 Meanwhile, mix all the sauce

- ingredients together in a large mixing bowl. Adjust the seasoning to taste. Keep refrigerated until needed.
- 4 Reduce the oven temperature to 300° F.
  - 5 Pour the barbecue sauce over the browned pork shoulder, cover tightly with foil and return to the oven for 2 hours to slowly braise in the sauce. The roast is finished when it is tender and reaches an internal temperature of 180° F. (Use a meat thermometer to check.) The meat should pull apart with little or no resistance.
  - 6 Allow the pork to cool, still covered in foil, in the sauce, until you can handle it comfortably. Remove it from the sauce and pull it apart into pieces. Mix the pork pieces back into the sauce and gently reheat in the oven.
  - 7 To serve, place the pulled meat mixture on a fresh baguette or toasted kaiser, or roll in a soft tortilla wrap. If you don't want it as a sandwich, it is great with some mashed potatoes and grilled vegetables. You may need to remove any excess sauce.



**INGREDIENTS** makes 12 biscuits

**JEFF'S NUTMEG BISCUITS**

- 4 cups** all-purpose flour
- 2 tbsp** baking powder
- ½ cup** sugar
- 2 tbsp** nutmeg
- ½ lb** unsalted butter or lard (cold)
- 1** 2% milk
- 1** egg (gently beaten)
- 1** brown sugar

**BERRIES**

- 4 cups** fresh or frozen (do not thaw)
- 4 cups** blueberries
- ½ cup** sugar
- 2 tbsp** Grand Marnier or amaretto

**WHIPPED CREAM**

- 4 cups** whipping cream
- ¼ cup** sugar
- ¼ cup** maple syrup
- 1 tsp** ground cardamom

- 1** Preheat the oven to 400° F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
- 2** For the biscuits, combine the dry ingredients, then cut in the butter until it is well incorporated and the mixture resembles rough breadcrumbs. Gradually add enough milk to bring the dough together. The dough should be a little moist and sticky.
- 3** Scatter flour on a clean work surface, then roll the dough out to a 1-inch thickness and cut it into the desired shape and size. I like circles or triangles for this.

- 4** Place the biscuit dough on the prepared baking sheet. Brush the tops of the biscuits with egg and sprinkle with brown sugar. Bake in the centre of the oven for 12 to 15 minutes or just until the biscuits are slightly golden. Cool on a cooling rack.
- 5** Meanwhile, place the berries in a bowl and toss them with the sugar. Add the Grand Marnier and let stand for 15 to 20 minutes to infuse the flavours.
- 6** For the whipped cream, whip together the cream, sugar, maple syrup and cardamom until soft peaks form. Be careful not to overwhip or you will lose volume.
- 7** To serve, cut a biscuit in half, spoon some berry mixture over one half, add a dollop of whipped cream and cap with the other biscuit half.



*Blueberry shortcake*



Get ready to pack your bags! Readers will want to fly east after consuming *Flavours of Prince Edward Island: A Culinary Journey*, co-authored by Jeff McCourt, Allan Williams and Austin Clement with recipes from the P.E.I. Association of Chefs and Cooks. The cookbook features photographer James Ingram's glorious pictures of P.E.I.'s red sandy beaches, sunny pastures and coastal highways – not to mention mouth-watering images of the luscious local cuisine. Concise, simple recipes are divided by food types: meats, seafood, cheese, wine, fruits and vegetables, while personal anecdotes from the three chefs illustrate the family-friendly, food-centred Island culture.

cake for my birthday,” says Jeff.

Growing up, he helped his mother prepare meals for his three sisters and his father, a manager of the local Home Hardware store. And at age 14, Jeff convinced his apprehensive mother that he could make seafood chowder on his own using lobster, clams and local fish. Jeff's mom, a part-time nurse, was concerned that all the ingredients would be wasted if the chowder was a flop. But the teenager's chowder was a sensation, inspiring further adventures with local ingredients.

“I love the food here, I love P.E.I. in general,” he says. “I spend countless hours searching for chanterelle mushrooms in the forest. Nothing makes me happier.”

Now the chef at Red Shores Racetrack and Casino, Jeff shares his adoration for the island with his wife, Grace, who works in tourism and hospitality. The couple met while they were both working at the Inn at Bay Fortune, where Jeff served as sous-chef to award-winning chef Michael Smith.

“Grace grew up on a dairy farm, and so we are both country folk,” says Jeff. “We both love the country and the closeness to the ingredients. Whenever we can, we go and see what's on the roadside stands.”

When Jeff can't visit the local growers, they come to him. “Farmers will knock on the kitchen's back door to show me their food,” he says. “You can tell they are passionate about their potatoes, in perfect condition, perfectly ripe.”

For Jeff and his fellow chefs, choosing locally grown food is about more than the freshest flavours – it's about the people of P.E.I. “Everyone knows everyone. It's probably due to our geography – we're not very big.” (Size notwithstanding, he had more than 65 different local producers supplying food when he was sous-chef at the Inn.)

Back at home, Jeff's children, Finn and Molly, are his most enthusiastic sous-chefs. “Both children want to get in there, and they help me when they can. Finn loves cooking just as much as I do. He stands on a milk crate, watching, asking questions.”

And while his grandmother is no longer around to fix the chef a blueberry pie for his birthday, his wife has happily taken on the all-important annual task.

“She can make a blueberry pie like no one's business!” Jeff tells us, laughing.