

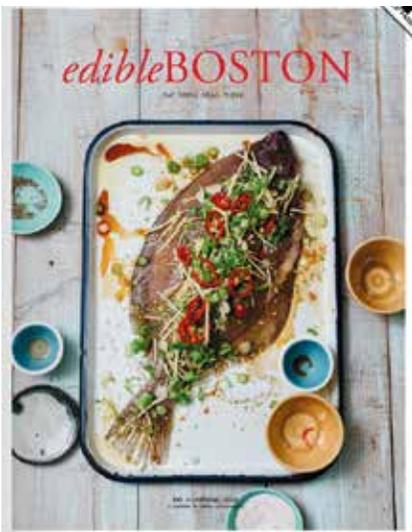
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CELEBRATING THE ABUNDANCE OF LOCAL FOOD



EDIBLE FOOD FINDS: SPIKER'S SHRUBS



by DEB KANEB

The word “shrub” brings to mind many images, most involving a relatively short woody green plant without a central trunk. The average person probably doesn't picture a deeply colored, intensely flavored, mildly vinegar-scented, concentrated liquid.

This was the case for Kate Broughton just a few years ago. In early 2013, Kate was celebrating a friend's first year anniversary of being cancer-free when the two decided (for a time at least) to stop drinking alcoholic beverages. She knew immediately that she'd want

a substitute beverage, so she bought a set of beautiful painted wine glasses and began researching alternatives.

Experiments with herb-infused simple syrups generally resulted in flavors too sweet for Kate's tastes, so she kept exploring. Her research eventually landed her on the official Colonial Williamsburg website, where she discovered an article on liquid shrubs. A longtime fan of tangy flavors, Kate knew she had found her beverage base of choice.

She began experimenting with different flavor profiles, sharing the results with friends and family of all ages. Before long, they began encouraging her to sell the product. It should be noted that Kate is not exactly a novice in the food or business world. Years ago, she was a lifestyle writer for *The Boston Globe* and *Boston Magazine* (among others) and once was an editor at the *Globe*. From 2008 to 2013, she and a friend owned a company that provided online media resources to businesses. In addition, two of her sisters are trained chefs, her daugh-

ter works in food services management at a local college, and she knows many people who have started food businesses.

With this foundation under her, Kate heeded the call in early 2014 and created Spiker's LLC, named in honor of her grandfather, John Spiker. She signed on as a client of Amesbury's Kitchen Local (a North Shore shared-use kitchen), became ServSafe certified, and obtained the required local permits and state license. She also worked with a lab

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specialist on production protocols and regulatory HACCP plan. That June, Kate and her crew (her husband, daughter and a team of freelance kitchen assistants) began production of Spiker's Shrubs.

Shrubs have been around for centuries and originated as a byproduct of preserving fruit. As Kate explains, “people learned that adding sugar to fruit preserves it, but when you put the two together the solution wants to ferment. To stop that fermentation, you add vinegar. Flavor from the fruit leaches into the liquid.

When you take the fruit out, the fruit itself has lost much of its taste, but the liquid itself is flavorful. It's kind of a syrup but it's not. It's a concentrated infusion of macerated fruit juices with a vinegar rather than water base.”

Most shrub recipes involve cooking the ingredients, but Kate finds the results too jammy and lacking bright flavor. Instead, she cold processes her shrubs. Roughly equal weights of fruit and sugar are combined in four gallon buckets and allowed to sit for at least 24 hours. The mixture is then added to vinegar (in general with a 1:1:1 ingredient weight ratio) and set aside for at least two to three weeks. Herbs are added at different points in the process, depending on the desired flavor profile.

By eying the solution, Kate knows when it's ready. The fruit shrinks, she explains, because sugar has pulled the juice out of the fruit's cell membranes and the flavors lock

into the vinegar. Along the way, Kate takes a minimum of four pH readings. The solution's pH decreases as the vinegar works its magic. A reading under 4.6 is the target.

After the liquid has gone into solution, it is strained into five-gallon buckets and bottled. Some flavors require multiple straining using different methods (pear for example) and others strain easily (apples are in this category). Most bottles are already sold before they leave the production facility, with one-liter sizes going to restaurants, and 12-ounce and sampler sizes distributed to businesses for retail sale. The leftover fruit is then donated to a local pig farm.

When seasonally possible Kate sources locally. The apples for her Apple Crisp shrub, for example, come from Cider Hill Farm in Amesbury, and the basil for her Pineapple Basil shrub is grown in recycled shipping containers at East Boston's Corner Stalk Farm. She's constantly thinking about and experimenting with new flavor combinations, and her creative flavors are bright, imaginative, delicious and versatile. They also are surprisingly addictive and refreshing.

As Kate notes on her website, “Today, shrubs are getting new life and appreciation from folks who want a break from super-sweet beverages and fake ingredients. Just a small amount of shrub—usually an ounce—is all you need to add a fresh pop of natural flavor to your favorite cocktail, mocktail, artisan soda, or culinary creation.” The company's website showcases the seemingly endless versatility of drinking vinegars as a complement to appetizers, salads, desserts and beverages, both with and without alcohol.

Asked what the future holds for her growing company, Kate says, “Our focus is to continue growing our distribution channels at specialty stores, fine food and drink establishments, and to add a few complimentary products to our existing line if and when we get a chance to catch our breath.”

Spiker's Shrubs are sold online and in many locations throughout New England, including Corner Stalk Farm's booth at the Boston Public Market, Pamplemousse in Reading, Shubie's in Marblehead, Cider Hill Farm in Amesbury, and Tendercrop Farm's multiple locations.

Local pickups also can be arranged through the company's web site, spikersshrubs.com.

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