

If you were lucky enough to eat a Bradford watermelon this season, then you are

Lucky Enough

The Story of Saving the Carolinas' Most Famous Melon

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY HEIDI BILLOTTO

The late harvest heirloom melon hails from Sumter, South Carolina and has been the pride and joy of members of the Bradford family since round about 1840, as best anyone can figure.

The much loved Bradfom Watermelon was thought by many food historians to be extinct, and the only people who knew for sure that this oh, so sweet and crispy, thin-skinned, thick-rinded melon had continued to thrive, were the Bradfords themselves.

My husband Tom and I were lucky enough to spend a hot early August day on the Bradford Farm with Nat Bradford. We walked through the Bradford Farm fields moving from one heirloom variety to another as Nat explained the history and background of each vegetable from Bradford collards and giant okra to the original variety of the South Carolina peanut – the African runner peanut, which Nat is growing this year for seed in an attempt to preserve the legume for generations to come.

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As we moved through the rows of these heritage varieties, Nat, a sixth generation Bradford family farmer, explained why it was important to him to go to the extra effort of saving seeds.

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the story, the heritage, behind the fruit or vegetable that makes the saving of the seeds so important.”

Tom and I were also lucky enough to hear Nat’s story first hand and lucky enough to eat our fill of the famous Bradford Melon. We enjoyed the cold sweet melon sitting on the front porch of the Bradford family home, the house Nat grew up in and the house where he and his wife Bette now raise the seventh generation of five young Bradford farmers.

Eating melon with the man who had raised this historied fruit from seed was an afternoon I will always remember. I have been to the mecca of watermelon and am here to tell the tale.

THE MELON THAT TOOK THE SOUTH BY STORM

The story of the Bradford family dates back to 1750 when the Bradfords first settled in and around the High Hills of the Santee not far from what is now Sumter, SC. Nat’s ancestors eventually moved and settled in Sumter to build their homestead. The land that comprised the family property had a different sort of soil; and as it turned out, the black silty soil that came up from the surrounding creekbeds was perfect for growing watermelon.

Back in the day farmers saved seeds because there simply wasn’t another way to farm. You raised crops, and then saved the seeds of the best of the lot to plant the next year. Produce adapted to regional terroir without the aid of chemicals, fertilizers and such. It was organic farming before it had a name, and because taste mattered above all, produce was bred predominantly for flavor.



Sometime in the mid 1800s, Nathaniel Napoleon Bradford, head of the Bradford household at the time, crossed the Lawson Watermelon with the Mountain Sweet Melon to develop a new varietal, and by the late 1800s the Bradford Watermelon was taking the South by storm.

The Bradford Watermelon was loved far and wide. Farmers in the area grew the prized late-harvest melons for the super sweet flesh. The Bradford Melon was also cherished for its paper thin skin and thick rind – perfect for pickling.

This was a time when “Farm to Fork” cooking wasn’t a culinary movement, it was a way of life; nothing was ever wasted or taken for granted. The fruit could be enjoyed in season and then preserved in a myriad of ways for use the rest of the year through. But then came the industrial revolution at the end of the 19th century.

Produce was being shipped further and further across the country, and these thin skinned melons didn’t stand a chance – they just didn’t travel well.

Farmers had to adapt, and the money was in melon varieties with thicker skins and harder rinds that would survive the shipping process. People compromised and gave up on growing for flavor. Most farmers stopped growing the Bradford variety, and in 1920 seed companies stopped selling the once so popular Bradford Melon seeds.

Through it all, though, without really knowing that anyone else really cared, the Bradford family kept growing the same melons with seeds from the year before.

Farming was not always the sole occupation of the Bradford patriarchs, but it was a part of the family’s lifestyle. Nat’s dad farmed, his granddad farmed, and his great granddad farmed – and in addition to other crops, in the late summer months they raised watermelons. Nat sold Bradford Watermelons in the summer the same way other kids had paper routes, never knowing that the rest of the country had all but given up looking for the treasure he continued to raise in his own back yard.

HOW THE MELON THAT WAS NEVER LOST, WAS FOUND AGAIN

Nat Bradford wanted to have a career in agriculture, but got talked out of the notion, and instead studied to become a landscape architect. In 1998 at the end of an internship at Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania, he decided to write about his family farm for his exit paper.

In his research, Nat was surprised to find references to his great grandfather with notes about the wonderfully sweet watermelons that Chief Bradford once grew.

Then, Nat came across a vegetable reference book from 1865 that listed the Bradford Watermelon as one of the best varieties you could grow. This was the first printed documentation that Nat had ever seen that actually dated his family’s melon back later than the three generations of which he was aware.

Fast forward to 2012, Nat made the decision to return to farming and give up the life of a landscape architect. One night he thought he would go back to do a bit more research on the watermelons his family had been growing for the past 180 years or so – could these be the same Bradford Melons he had read had gone extinct?

Now aided by the use of the internet, Nat began reading how many thought the Bradford Watermelon was gone. Nat’s research brought him to Dr. David Shields, Carolina Distinguished Professor at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. Shields sports a long and impressive list of credentials and has a keen interest in regional Southern cuisine and foods that make it so. Nat sent an email to Shields to ask if the melon his family had been growing all this time and the long lost Bradford Melon might be one in the same.

THAT WAS THE DAY THAT EVERYTHING CHANGED.

It blew up when word got out that the Bradford Watermelon was still alive and well.

Since then, Nat has made it his mission with selective seed saving to raise bigger and bigger crops of the incredibly sweet, incredibly large, late harvest melons,



Bette and Nat Bradford



Current trio of Bradford Watermelon products available for sale



CL Food Writer Heidi Billotto with Nat Bradford and 50 delicious pounds of Bradford melon

and with each year he has been able to produce more than the year before, with prime melons weighing in at 30 to 50 pounds each.

Nat doesn’t just raise melons, he makes it a point to preserve them however he can. He coaxes the sugar out of the flesh to make two varieties of watermelon molasses – red and black, both unlike anything else you have ever tasted.

And that thick white rind? It’s delicious all on its own and tastes almost like a cucumber; but is best loved and enjoyed when it is sweet pickled.

We tried the legendary Bradford pickled rind on crackers with Bette Bradford’s homemade pimento cheese, oh my!

I most definitely suggest you order a jar (or two), make a batch of pimento cheese, and enjoy it in just the same way.

Ever on the search for something new, Nat is working with an artisan oil company in Georgia to make watermelon seed oil. It’s not available for sale yet, but I sampled a test batch, and I can tell you, it tastes of butter and smells just like baked cookies; so stay tuned as that product is readied to hit the market.

Meanwhile, Nat has partnered with Six & Twenty Distillery in Piedmont, SC, to make a Bradford watermelon brandy. Now in its third year of production, the label on the brandy includes nine gold stars in honor and in remembrance of the nine victims slain at the Mother Emanuel A.M.E. church in Charleston, SC in 2015.

The Bradford Melon has become the poster child for seed saving. But for Nat, this is more than the story of a melon, it has become his mission to help save and teach others how to save heritage foods.

Today Nat not only saves his own seeds, but continues to work with others to save seeds and grow other heirloom varieties that without some immediate attention could potentially become extinct.

Follow Nat and the farm on the Bradford Watermelon website and on social media. It’s the end of the melon season for now; but lucky enough, there are plenty of jars of Bradford Watermelon Molasses and Pickled Bradford Watermelon rind to be ordered and enjoyed – and don’t forget about the Watermelon Brandy! It’s all available through the website at bradfordwatermelons.com

Visit HeidiBillottoFood.com for the recipe for Bette Bradford’s pimento cheese and others using the Bradford Watermelon Molasses and the Bradford Watermelon pickled rind, plus one for a fun watermelon cocktail made with frozen Bradford Watermelon puree and the Bradford Watermelon Brandy. ■