

Savor Today

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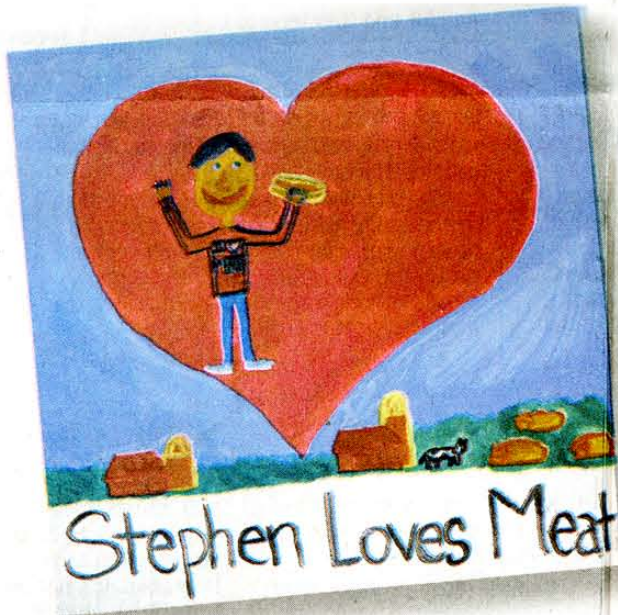
The Star-Ledger

Building a better hot dog



PHOTOS BY JOE EPSTEIN/THE STAR-LEDGER

Chris Ely, left, and Stephen McDonnell, founders of Applegate Farms. Below, one of the many children's paintings decorating the company's conference room that help illustrate the story of the Bridgewater-based firm, a purveyor of organic and natural deli meats, cheeses and other products.



Bridgewater's Applegate Farms brings deli meats to the plate with a program for more healthful eating

BY VICKI HYMAN
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Stephen McDonnell was the worst vegetarian ever.

He had spent every Sunday night of his Atomic Age childhood in Peapack feasting on Sunday roasts, but he went off to hippie haven Hampshire College in the 1970s, at the emergence of the natural foods movement, and discovered a new way of eating, and buying, food.

He dabbled in macrobiotics, joined a food co-op and dined on locally grown fruits and vegetables. He ate granola. In bulk.

But he wasn't happy. Something was missing. And it turned out to be meat.

Just how bad a vegetarian was Stephen

McDonnell? He bought a smokehouse.

"What can I say?," he laughs. "Life's too short not to have bacon on your spinach salad."

Today McDonnell, 54, is an unapologetic carnivore, but a nice one. He bought out the owner of Jugtown Smokehouse in Flemington because it produced healthier, nitrate-free bacon, and he and the owner's son, Chris Ely, have expanded that single smokehouse into an organic and natural meat empire, with products ranging from nitrate-free pepperoni sticks to antibiotic-free cold cuts to gluten-free bacon to cheese containing probiotics, or live active cultures that reportedly help digestion and boost the

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LOCAL RESTAURATEURS TACKLE SWEETS

The owners of New Brunswick's Stage Left and Catherine Lombardi restaurants have unveiled their own line of signature exotic chocolates. "Chocolate should be complex," Mark Pascal says. "Flavors should be layered and deep like a great wine or well-made cocktail."

Pascal and Francis Schott, who also host the "Restaurant Guys" radio show, teamed up with college buddies Mike and Jennifer Schnur to produce and

curate the line, which currently features coffee, cinnamon- and chili-infused Diablo, citrusy elderflower, roasted pumpkin seed laced with Maldon sea salt, coffee and Earl Grey, redolent bergamot.

You can buy the chocolate at restaurantguyschocolate.com (\$36 for a box of 16). The chocolates have no preservatives or stabilizers, so they should be consumed within seven days. Something tells us that won't be an issue

— Vicki Hymn

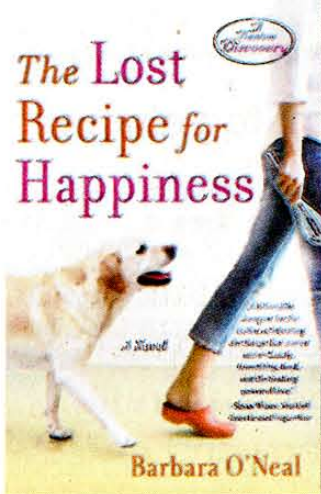
WRITING FROM THE STOMACH

Barbara O'Neal's new novel, "The Lost Recipe for Happiness," does indeed read like a recipe: Take a heap of chick lit, add a dollop of food porn, finish off with a soupçon of magical realism.

If it were a dish, it would be a casserole — but just because it's a little recycled doesn't mean it tastes bad. In the novel (Bantam Dell, \$13), Elena Alvarez, an up-and-coming chef whose body and spirit bear the scars of a

long-ago accident, takes the helm of her dream kitchen in Aspen, rustling up high-end Southwestern favors while she deals with a prickly sous-chef and the appealing restaurant owner and her own demons. O'Neal spikes the story with luscious sounding recipes, including *posole*, *carnitas*, pork and red chili tamales, the Mexican Christmas cookies known as *polvorones*, and the not-so-native but mouthwatering pomegranate baklava.

— Vicki Hymn





JOE EPSTEIN/THE STAR-LEDGER

Applegate Farms' products go beyond hot dogs and include pot pies, chicken nuggets, bacon, sausages and cheeses.



JOE EPSTEIN/THE STAR-LEDGER

Emily Colon, the quality control coordinator at Applegate Farms, takes a piece of roast beef to taste.

APPLEGATE

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A better hot dog

immune system.

The company even produces organic hot dogs, which McDonnell says took a good decade to perfect. To quote from the company's tongue-in-cheek advertising materials: "Holy grass-fed cow!"

Applegate Farms is based in Bridgewater, but the company gets its meat and dairy from nearly 300 family farms specializing in meat raised humanely, without antibiotics or hormones. (That's right. Old McDonnell has no farm.)

McDonnell says he eschews factory farms because they depend too much on antibiotics to ward off disease. That allows such farms to use cheaper feed — sometimes including animal byproducts — and to keep the animals in crowded, unhealthy conditions, which, he says, results in lower-quality meat.

Because organic feed costs more than conventional feed, Applegate Farms products can be more expensive than most of its neighbors in the deli case, although they are on a par with a premium label like Boar's Head.

Laila Morris, the company's senior business manager, acknowledges that the lousy economy makes for some uncomfortable choices, but she's confident that people who are serious about eating healthier, or those who have children with medical issues, won't switch to cheaper meat. "Ingredients are critical," she says. "These are probably one of the last things someone is going to give up. They'll give up vacations; they won't go to the movies."

The company name may be a bit misleading, but its headquarters, in an anonymous low-rise office building off Route 202, plays up the agrarian angle to the hilt. There are rough-hewn tables and milk-can stools in the company kitchen, where the sales staff was recently sampling from heaping platters of Southwest Chipotle turkey, Black Forest ham and roast beef. There's antique farming equipment on display, and meditative photos of Amish farm life on the walls, but this is definitely a 21st-century

business. Check out the meditation room tucked away in the corner.

McDonnell's background is in finance and management, but he didn't enjoy corporate life. After working with his entrepreneurial brother-in-law, who owned a glass-blowing business that included a wholesale line, a retail store and a restaurant, he started looking for his own business opportunity.

When he and Ely took over Jugtown in 1987, he updated the equipment and introduced new items, including low-fat options (the result of McDonnell's discovery that he had record-breaking high cholesterol). But he didn't fully put his philosophy of friendly carnivorousism to the test until the smokehouse burned down about 10 years later.

At that point, they decided to expand the product line extensively into the organic and natural realm and outsource the processing. They changed the name to Applegate Farms (no relation to the beloved Jersey ice cream maker), and now the company uses 12 processing facilities. Applegate tells the makers where to get the meat and how to prepare it.

In a culture where corporations stoop to market mystery meats to preschoolers, Applegate Farms is also reaching out to its youngest consumers. In November, the company launched, along with the Philadelphia-based Food Trust, a healthy eating program called the Kindergarten Initiative at Van Derveer Elementary School in Somerville.

The program helps teachers develop a curriculum about nutrition and agriculture, and brings healthy snacks from nearby farms to local schools. There are also two field trips this spring to Fernbrook Farms Education Center in Chesterfield Township; at the first, students will help prepare seeds in the greenhouse that will eventually be planted in a garden in the school's courtyard.

"It sounds like a heavy concept for kindergartners, but it's not," says Eric Tadlock, Fernbrook Farms education director. "They never knew that lettuce could be red, or you could put fruit on salad. It's really instilling great habits in the kids at a young age, and it's invaluable."

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Applegate Farms' turkey club ringdini.

The Turkey Club Ringdini

— From Applegate Farms 6 to 8 servings

1 10-inch ring-shaped bread loaf
1 package Applegate Farms Roasted Turkey
1 package Applegate Farms Havarti Cheese
1 package Applegate Farms Sunday Bacon, cooked
1 medium tomato, thinly sliced
1 avocado, thinly sliced
1 handful baby lettuce

1. For even toasting, use a serrated knife to remove a thin layer of crust from the top of the ring loaf. Split the loaf in half crosswise. Cover the bottom half of the bread with half the cheese. Layer on turkey, tomato, avocado, bacon and

lettuce. Top with the remaining cheese.

2. Place the Ringdini into a lightly oiled, heavy 12-inch skillet over medium heat. Lightly brush the top of the Ringdini with olive oil and place a smaller skillet on top of the ring. For a nicely pressed sandwich, place a tea-kettle filled halfway with water into the smaller pan. Heat the Ringdini until the bottom is toasted. Flip the ringdini and repeat.

3. Slice the ringdini into individual portions and place a bowl of Green Goddess sauce in the center for dipping.

Green Goddess Dipping Sauce

2 medium avocados, pitted, peeled and chopped into cubes
2 tablespoons lemon or lime juice
1 tablespoon chopped basil leaves
1 tablespoon chopped tarragon leaves
1 clove garlic, minced
½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. In a food processor, combine avocado cubes, lemon or lime juice, basil, tarragon and garlic. Blend until smooth.

2. With the motor running, slowly pour in olive oil to make a thick, creamy dressing. If dressing is too thick to pour, add water, a few tablespoons at a time, to reach the desired consistency. Refrigerate until chilled.

Italian Sausages, Greens and White Beans

— From Applegate Farms 4 servings

1 head escarole, leaves separated, washed, and torn into pieces
Salt
4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
8 Applegate Farms Organic Italian Sausages, cut crosswise into 1-inch-thick pieces
1 small yellow onion, peeled and chopped
1 clove garlic, peeled and chopped
1 28-ounce can whole peeled plum tomatoes
1 15.5-ounce can white beans, such as navy, great Northern, or cannellini, drained
2 heads Belgian endive or 1 small head radicchio, rinsed, trimmed and quartered
Freshly ground black pepper

1. Blanch escarole in a large skillet of boiling salted water over medium-high heat until just wilted, about 30 seconds. Drain and set aside.

2. Wipe the skillet dry, add oil, and heat over medium-high heat. Add sausages and cook until browned all over, about 5 minutes. Add onions and garlic and cook until onions are soft, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the tomatoes, crushing them with your hand as you add them to the skillet, then add the canning juices. Add the blanched greens, endive or radicchio, and the beans. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Stir well to combine.

3. Cook until the endive or radicchio wilt and the skillet juices thicken slightly, about 5 minutes.