



42 DELICIOUS SUMMER RECIPES

Try This NO-COOK CHEESECAKE p.105



FOOD PREP STARS



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REAL LIFE

hometown
BLUEMONT, VA

SWEET PEA

Maya gives son Max a happy squeeze. "We wanted to create our own little world for him, with our own rules," she says.

EVERYDAY HERO

Growing Hope

A farm helps people with disabilities plant the seeds of a more productive future

WHEN MOM AND FARMER MAYA WECHSLER HIRES WORKERS for the planting season every year, she first has to convince them there's actually a farm. The 24 acres in Bluemont, VA, lie barren in the spring, nary a tomato or zucchini in sight. "Getting them to understand that there will be vegetables everywhere is hard," she says. Soon, though, Maya, 39, and her team are carefully coaching young men and women with learning disabilities, mental illnesses or developmental disorders like autism through the finer points of feeding the goats or picking cucumbers. "Just do your best," she says encouragingly.

That could be her personal motto. When they founded A Farm Less Ordinary in 2016, Maya (a business exec) and her real estate agent husband, Greg Masucci, 55, knew next to nothing about agriculture. What they did know was the troubling statistic that fewer →

than one in five adults with a disability are employed—a fact that hit home because their son, 10-year-old Max, has a severe form of autism.

Living with Max and his 8-year-old sister, Delilah, in Washington, DC, had become frighteningly difficult. “The walk from the car to our house was a gauntlet of traffic,” Maya says. “Something had to change.” Maya and Greg bought a house and land in Virginia, where Max, who’s nonverbal, could squeal on the swings at 6 a.m. without irking neighbors and safely roam the woods with their dogs.

But that didn’t answer the question of what Max’s future could hold. Would he be able to work? Make friends? Over a bottle of wine one night, Maya and Greg got a big idea: They’d turn their land into a farm and employ people who were disabled—people like Max.

Maya took classes on business management and crop production and grilled local farmers about their methods. Next, she planted a garden of squash, lettuce, tomatoes and peppers, producing such a giant riot of veggies that she donated buckets of them to a shelter for abused women. Taking that success as a sign that they were ready to farm, she recruited her first group of workers through high schools and nonprofits. Every hire had a disability and was paid for his or her work.

Soon Maya learned that the key to success was matching employees with tasks they would excel at. Someone who couldn’t plant could clear brush; someone who hated harvesting could clean the henhouse. “We offer a place where they can be



FIELD OF DREAMS

Left, picking veggies. Above, workers with volunteer coaches.

their own quirky selves and learn basic job skills,” says Maya. “Show up on time. Ask how to do something if you don’t understand. Don’t take too many breaks.”

Once a week, Maya and her team sell their produce at the local farmers’ market. (Market sales and CSA memberships make up 25% of the farm’s revenue; the rest comes from donations and grants.) Since employees with disabilities sometimes harvest weeds or not-yet-ripe melons, nothing looks perfect. “We tell our customers, ‘What you’re doing here is supporting these people,’” says Maya. “Our main clients are our employees.”

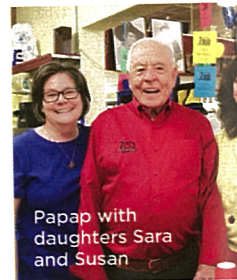
The farm is likely to be Max’s forever home, although his autism is severe enough that he may never be able to work there independently. But that’s OK by Maya. “I love that we have found our tribe here,” she says. “The happy low-level chaos on our farm means that our messy, chaotic family fits right in.” She hopes there will always be a crew of people like Max planting and chasing chickens right outside his door. —Melody Warnick

Go to afarmlessordinary.org to donate or find out ways to volunteer.

MY HERO

Love Lessons

It’s unusual to have a job for 10 years, let alone the 71 that Virgil “Papap” Gust has logged running his general store in Big Timber, MT (population 1,600). From his perch behind his balcony desk, Papap, 97, has won the town’s heart, greeting every customer by name, working on the school board, volunteering as a firefighter and more. But even the dynamo dad could use helping hands, so in 2014, daughters Sara McFarland and Susan St. Germain came back home to pitch in.



Papap with daughters Sara and Susan

“Through his kindness and generosity, he showed my brother, my sister and me what family and community should be and how to treat other people,” says Sara. “Everybody is a part of the store in a small town. People come in all the time and holler, ‘Where is Virgil and he’ll say, ‘What do you want? You want me up!’ It’s like havin’ people to your home —as told to Rachael Riff

A Better Book Club

SUPPORTING WRITERS OF COLOR

The idea of bringing literature lovers together monthly to discuss a book isn’t new, but **Well-Read Black Girl** is on a mission to make it fresh—and to increase visibility for authors of color. Founded by Glory Edim (right) in 2015, the Brooklyn-based book club and online community (wellreadblackgirl.com) boasts more than 30,000 members and celebrates black women writers through in-person meet-ups, Twitter chats and the WRBG Writers’ Conference and Festival. —Alexis Relliford



READER TRIBUTES

GH fans Sara and Susan wrote in to tell us about their dad, and we’d love to hear about your heroes. Email ghhero@hearst.com