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Country Style

By ALEXANDRA MALL | @alexmall_ig@gmail.com

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"I call this Trail you for silent" says Christopher Kimball, putting and rolling out a ball of pie-crust dough. In his mangled Irish shirt, he looks like a very different man than he does when hosting his popular PBS series, America's Test Kitchen—much more gentleman farmer than the MIT scientist-type guy he actually is. He's in his Nantucket home, a cozy cottage with a couple of sweating pants. In place of his spotless studio kitchen is a wide wooden and marble counter and twin antique stoves, and instead of a cast of prep staff whisking and baking around him, his family is sipping coffee and shuffling through the morning mail.

Kimball, his wife, Adrienne, and their four children seem unquestionably at home in their rambling and rustic Vermont farmhouse, a four-hour drive from Boston. Here they spend months each summer tending the garden, feeding the chickens and pigs, and chilling out.

"People here couldn't care less about who you are back in the city," says Adrienne Kimball, a tall, lean, fair-haired woman who's quick to smile and neighbor you are if you help out on their farm when they need it, and if you're willing to be yourself with them. That's important to us as a family, and it also sets relaxing."

Relaxing isn't quite the word that springs to mind while watching Chris and Adrienne Kimball whirl from chalkboard around the kitchen, setting up for a dinner party with relatives and neighbors. The two turn from preparing one dish to another between chores and cutting flowers, then from chores back there's corn to be shucked and made into a fresh, bright-flavored soup. If Kimball is known for anything back in the city, it's for figuring out what works best in making food. Even in a setting as personal as his family farmhouse, entertaining properly is priority number one. "I'm still the ultimate host," he says, scooping a freshly baked muffin.

So much of modern day entertaining is done vicariously. We spend our free time watching cooking shows on which the hosts chop, prep, and arrange everything, while we lift naps a finger. There we go to the nearest Whole Foods Market and line plates, bowls, and other prepared items. And while the convenience of all may be a godsend for people with busy lives, the truth is that more and more of us today don't know what it's like to take hand-curated pride in the food we serve.

The remarkable thing is that Kimball actually does live the made-from-scratch lifestyle we all are him peddling on TV. Never is that more clear than during the long weeks he spends in Vermont every year, with no one watching and no one to impress but good friends and family.

If Kimball isn't stuffing and roasting an chickens to find the precisely correct proportion of bread to feed, he's tossing crumb until he finds the ideal texture to make the perfect apple pie. Kimball has been testing recipes for decades, publishing them in his Boston-based magazine, Cook's Illustrated, Boston-based Cook's Illustrated. Since then he's been sharing all on his TV show and with fellow tastemaker Martha Stewart as a guest on her CBS show. It could be argued especially in light of Stewart's distinctive legal problems that Kimball is the new Martha Stewart of classic American food.

It's little usual on the home-grown front anyway." Kimball concurs, watching his son, Charlie, tromp across the front yard. From the sprawling porch of the house, Kimball points out his three brown-clothes, Chief, Shadow, Dakota, and Indy in the electric-green pasture overlooking a dappled valley. Butterflies the actual hum of bother dip and flutter around Kimball's head as she sets a tray of iced tea glasses onto a table. Neighbors will be by soon for dinner, but there's still plenty of time to get everything together.

"Meals are co-ongoing here," Adrienne says. "In the summer we tend to cook very simple to make the most of the food we get right in our own front-lawn bed and yard." In addition to a strawberry field, the family has its own apple orchard and gets honey from beehives a short walk from the front door.

Company is usually local farmers who come over for dinner. "We spend as much time as we can with people who are really from Vermont," Kimball says. "We want the kids to experience values that are different than in the city."

It's clear the Kimballs have worked hard to make this place as much a personal sanctuary as a gathering place for family and community. "Here, you feel connected," says Kimball. "Especially for me, since I grew up nearby." He may be a city boy now-working at the America's Test Kitchen office and studio in Brookline Village and living in a Boston townhouse-Kimball's roots are pure country. He spent childhood summers on a different Vermont farm which would later become the inspiration for a cookbook he titled The Yellow Farmhouse-surrounded by neighbors who helped harvest hay, milk cows, and do all the other chores that keep a farm afloat's business. "We ran some cop-farm and for a lot more simple than we do the rest of the year," he says.

Back in the kitchen, the corn's been picked and shucked. Kimball tosts the cobs whole-husks and all-in a pot of boiling water, then carries them across the front porch, where neighbors are clustered around platters of brisachets. The sounds of laughter and ice cubes clinking in glasses of iced tea fuel their way through the screen door.

Appearances to the contrary, "there's nothing perfect about the parties we have around here," insists Kimball. "You just find little anecdotes of interesting people and join them in whatever they're doing."

But Kimball's high-profile career has been based on a dedication to getting his hands dirty and testing things until they're perfect. It's clear that, for him, an enjoyable day off doesn't mean doing nothing. "Relaxing for me means being busy with all day," he says. In that sense, the Kimball's weekends seem the ideal foil to Kimball's city life: a place where the only pressures are the ones he chooses.

A moment later, the sun starts to set over the distant mountain, and the Kimball family gathers around the table. Candles are lighted, the hurricane lamps, candles, and vases of bright wildflowers. Neighbors raise their glasses in thanks, and everyone digs in. Even the dinner Kimball says is "anything but perfect" couldn't be more so. Like the meals he serves so hard to perfect, everything has come together exactly right.

Roasted gingered beets with orange
Serves eight to ten
This recipe is particularly good when served with barbecued pork.

2 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 tablespoon minced gingerroot
1 tablespoon orange zest
2 tablespoons orange juice
2 teaspoons sugar
6 large beets, rounded and quartered
Salt and freshly ground black
pepper to taste

Melt butter in a skillet over medium heat. Add the minced gingerroot and sauté for 20 seconds. Add the remaining ingredients except the beets and cook for 30 seconds. Add beets and cook for five minutes, tossing beets frequently. Add salt and liberal amounts of freshly ground black pepper to taste.

Slow-cook pork barbecue
Serves eight to ten
It's best to have a covered grill with a built-in thermometer so you don't have to lift the cover to check the temperature. Be sure to keep the heat low-it should never get much above 225 degrees and use indirect heat. Weber makes half-moon shaped charcoal bins for indirect cooking.

4 to 5-pound boneless pork butt
2 tablespoons rub
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