

Book serves up stew of farming history

By **BRIAN J. FONSECA**
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WESTPORT — Most people don't know how complicated it is to get fruits and other farm goods from the field to supermarket shelves.

Chef Kerrie Downey Romaniello has not only made the story available, but also managed to throw in some unique recipes right from the source.

Romaniello's seven-chapter, 160-page book "Out of the Earth: A Heritage Coast Cookbook" will contain about 150 graphics, illustrations and photographs, as well as interviews with local farmers and recipes.

The cookbook is slated to be released by Spinner Publications on June 19.

However Romaniello and the Westport River Watershed Alliance (WRWA) plan to celebrate the project a bit early with a definitive "taste" of the work's essence.

As part of the WRWA River Nights Program, at 4 p.m. on Feb. 28 there will be a panel discussion on local farming issues in the Westport Middle School auditorium.

The discussion will include: the businessman as a farmer, the farmer as a businessman, the need for education — particularly educating the young to close the loop on land protection, and the need for clarity on substantiality.

Following the discussion, dinner in the school cafeteria at 5:00 p.m. will feature a specialty menu of

recipes taken directly from Romaniello's cookbook and whipped up by some of the area's finest chefs.

Hearty appetites can dive into assorted samples of items such as verjus fondue, smokey chicken chowder and Macomber chowder, potato/onion tart, Indian pudding, and chocolate applesauce cake.

Romaniello, executive chef for Westport Rivers Vineyard and Winery, said the endeavor opened her eyes to a multi-faceted enterprise she rarely gave much thought.

"For me, my value in farming was too small, even for a chef. I think my opinion of it may have been a bit too romantic. What I hope to convey are the realities of farming as one of the most difficult professions, but also necessary," said Romaniello.

She continued, "These people have to be some of the savviest business people. They have to deal with tougher restrictions than most companies do. Taxes, pesticides, they're very heavily regulated in a lot of different ways. I also learned they are one of four economic engines that generate new dollars into the economy."

For her book, she interviewed two local growers for each crop heading. Each interview is then followed by a series of recipes (100 total) that have to do with the crop covered in the chapter.

The book's chapters include: herbs, lettuces and edible flowers; pumpkin, squash and potatoes; corn, beans and tomatoes; apples and peaches; berries and more berries (cranberries, blueberries and blackberries); grapes for wine; and the Macomber turnip.

Local farms that helped contribute to "Out of the Earth" are the Salt Wind Farm and George Farm, Dartmouth; Westport Rivers Vineyard and Winery, Costa Farm, and Noquechoke Orchards, Westport; Oakdale Farm, Rehoboth; Decas Brothers Cranberry, Wareham; Ward's Berry Farm, Sharon; Sakonnet Vineyards, Little Compton, R.I., and Ferrolbink Farms, Tiverton.

The author said the area's rich agricultural history along the "Heritage Coast" played a major role in research for the book. The idea for the cookbook actually grew from a collaborative project designed to promote the Westport Macomber turnip — described as a combination of a rutabaga and horse radish — begun in the town by Adin Elihu Macomber.

Eventually Romaniello began to realize the importance of many other local crops, and set out to investigate their history, their farmers, and future preservation of them.

Romaniello said she plans to complete two more books in the Heritage series. The second, "From the Sea," is expected to entail the ocean's historical relationship with the area in terms of food and cooking with the fishing industry.

The third will be "In the Neighborhood," featuring the history of ethnic foods and a close look at the people involved with them now.

For more information about reserving a seat at the WRWA dinner and discussion event, call 636-3016.