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Last of the Great Green Beans

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On a fall trip to Napa, I was lucky enough to have dinner made by one of my favorite cooks, Janet Fletcher, author of *Fresh From The Farmers' Market* and other books--an incredible 18, according to her bio on the site of the *San*

Francisco Chronicle, where she's a contributor. I've long known Fletcher as one of the most common-sense and thorough of food writers, with a sensibility perfectly attuned to what's in season and fresh, uncomplicated, tasty food--maybe a result of her being a graduate of the Chez Panisse kitchen in addition to the Culinary Institute of America. And maybe it's from getting to live and garden--her bio says she's a certified Master Gardener, which sounds nearly as difficult as being a Master Sommelier--in Napa, where I perhaps romantically think it's hard *not* to be attuned to fresh food.

As is often the case with writers working on cookbooks, we got to have recipes Fletcher is testing for her next book--about, as it happens, a woman from another part of the world with that same sensibility, Calabria, and a bountifully good cook named Rosetta Costantino, whose family emigrated when she was 14 and set about growing and preserving as much as they could in their own traditions. Now Costantino teaches her own [classes](#) in Sonoma, and is collaborating with Fletcher, who first [wrote](#) about her five years ago. With just a touch of envy, Fletcher, who has her own large garden, told me in a letter, "Rosetta's father, who was a farmer in Calabria, maintains the garden in her backyard. You have never seen such gorgeous produce. The secret, apparently, is rabbit manure."

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Obviously, the family has other secrets worth knowing, and Fletcher will reveal them in her next book. She made two dishes so good I immediately demanded the recipes, and she kindly provided them, with the permission of both Costantino and their publisher, Norton. I'll save one with unbelievably good pork ribs as sauce for big wide pasta noodles for when the weather gets colder,

The Atlantic

and give one now for my favorite green beans: big wide romanos.

In the height of farmer's market season, August through October, I buy ridiculous quantities of romanos, and spend even more ridiculous amounts of time topping and tailing them, as the English would say--though as my friend Sheryl Julian, editor of *The New Boston Globe Cookbook*, once pointed out as I complained about how much time it took, you only have to top them--the curlicue tail is perfectly edible.

These beans are best overcooked, and yes you read that right. Like the incredibly good baked Jonagold apples my stepmother made for a Connecticut visit this weekend--I told her that I considered the baking dish of six to be a single serving, and of course everyone chuckled though I wasn't joking--the beans hold their shape with long cooking and only get better with time. (My stepmother's secret is a deep pool of maple syrup from Bradway's Sugar House in Stafford Springs, which we visited during sugar season when I was a child; you can call them at 860-684-7112 to see if they're able to send any by mail. Wherever you buy syrup, though, always try to find grade B, which has far better flavor than grade A.)

I devoted an entire article myself to the virtues of long-cooked romanos, giving a Tuscan recipe for them stewed with tomatoes, onion, and fennel seed, still one of my favorite suppers. (It's not on our site! To appear in the collected works, I'm afraid.) Costantino's recipe is a variation--a room-temperature salad dressed with red-wine vinegar and including lots of garlic. I couldn't stop eating it, not just because of my love of long-cooked romanos--when Fletcher came over, we began with a cook-off of three kinds from the Napa farmer's market I'd been to that morning--but because it had something salty but deep that combined with the garlic to make a powerfully alluring flavor.

This was a touch Fletcher couldn't resist adding, though it sure isn't Tuscan or Calabrian. I didn't get it, because it was so out of context, though it clicked as soon as she told me:

Being a salt fiend, I can't resist adding a splash of Thai fish sauce to the dressing for these beans, and when I can get the mild Torpedo onions (the elongated red ones), I add some sliced red onion, too. I think Rosetta would approve of the red onion but not the fish sauce.

Her recipe, with introduction in Costantino's voice, is [here](#). The splash of fish sauce is up to you.

In the past few weeks I've haunted the last of the farmer's markets around Boston--some of which last until the week before Thanksgiving. (We don't yet have a year-round farmer's market, as we envy New York City and Portland, Maine for having, though [this group](#) is working to start one.) And, of course, I've bought every last romano bean I could. And I've found some! I hope you do,

The Atlantic

too, and that you try either tomato-fennel seed stew or this salad, fish sauce or no. Just be sure to overcook them, please.