

A Recipe for Community

Ending hunger and increasing nutritional food access are just some of The Family Table Collaborative's Cape-wide initiatives.

BY LISA CAVANAUGH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW GARDNER

“We kept hearing that it was the only home-cooked meal they were getting every week,” says Jeni Wheeler of the Cape Cod families and seniors she and her **Family Table Collaborative** (FTC) co-founder Harry Henry began feeding in March 2020. For the two culinarily connected friends, it was an important and immediate response to an urgent need at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I think for the first six months I would cry every day as we were doing distributions. They were tears of joy, but the experience was so emotionally overwhelming,” Wheeler adds.

Since that time, their new nonprofit has not only prepared and directly distributed more than 90,000 meals, soups, and other food items within the Cape community, it has also found a permanent home at the former Riverway Lobster House restaurant in Yarmouth. The reborn property, renovated by volunteers, is now The Commons at Riverway and operates as a café, tavern, and local Maker's Market.

But that's not all—FTC also rents its commercial kitchen to food makers and entrepreneurs and offers space for community functions, fundraising dinners, and wine and spirit pairings. In addition, the building boasts workforce housing and a community garden. Proceeds from these public-facing endeavors support FTC's meal distribution program for needy Cape Codders.

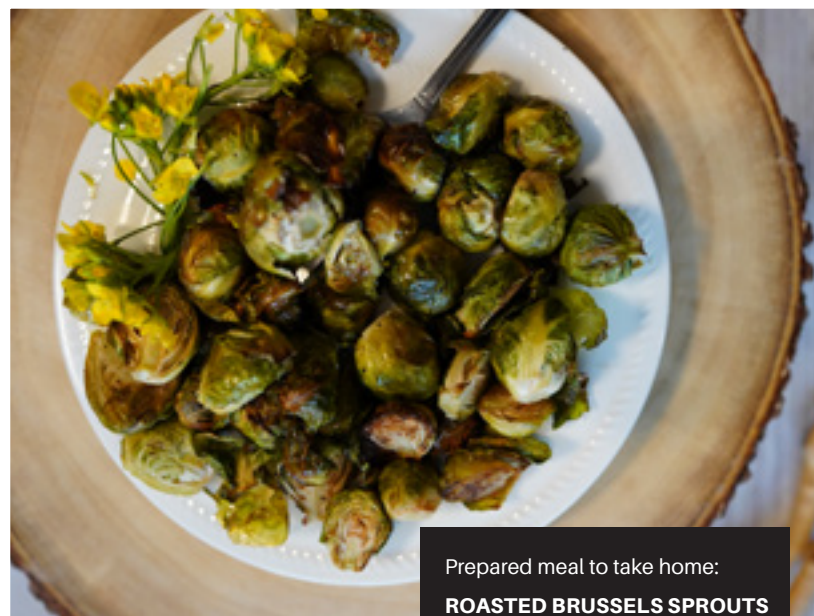
“This is a completely different model. We're working towards creating a self-sustaining nonprofit,” says Wheeler. “We are creating something that will help all of Cape Cod, and it really is a community-wide effort.”



Wheeler, who has experience operating soup kitchens as well as running her own gourmet prepared food services company, met Henry as part of the Cape Cod Culinary Incubator, where he served as board president. “I had been cooking for him under an Urban Agenda grant, and we both saw that food security would be an issue with COVID-19,” she says. The pair reached out to the American Culinary Federation, which had been receiving calls from restaurants about potential donations, and the food delivery collaboration took flight.

Almost immediately FTC found generous support within the restaurant and food industry. “We were helped by the Cape Codder Resort, Guaranteed Fresh Produce, and Camp Wingate Kirkland before we moved into Riverway,” says Wheeler. FTC’s first two years were a success thanks to local foundations, a financial arrangement with the Riverway owners, in-kind donations from Cape Cod food producers, incredible volunteer efforts, and the enormous passion of Wheeler and Henry.

Wheeler stresses that local need remains strong, and their team focuses on nutritional security, as the low-cost foods that struggling community members can afford often lack complex nutrients. “Not all food is created equally,” she says. “A person constantly hungry and driven by economic strife ends up getting high-fat, high-salt, highly processed food that does not allow the body to function as it should.”



Prepared meal to take home:
ROASTED BRUSSELS SPROUTS



Prepared meal to take home:
ITALIAN SALAD THREE WAYS
Caprese salad, Italian green beans with roasted garlic herbs and baby tomatoes, and farro salad topped with choy sum flowers.



To help combat this, FTC meals feature healthy proteins and fresh produce, and Wheeler says she is “committed to spice.” She is also planning a pilot program to teach how to make meals from ingredients typically available at food pantries.

The FTC is also hosting Wellness Eats, a food program by the cancer support organization Cape Wellness Collaborative. “Wellness Eats didn’t have a permanent home, so we brought them under our roof,” says Wheeler. Now, Wellness Eats can provide greater amounts of free nutritious meals to people dealing with cancer. Plus, they can sell healthy meals to the public through FTC’s Maker’s Market as a new revenue stream. “This new relationship benefits FTC, Cape Wellness Collaborative, and the community at large,” Wheeler relates.

Allowing the community to participate is the essence of the co-founders’ vision. “Our Maker’s Market allows culinary entrepreneurs on Cape Cod to share their products with the public year round,” says Wheeler, “which is key when trying to survive a traditionally seasonal economy.”

Mitchell Rogers, whose newly launched Chatham Ice Cream Bars have become a hit treat for residents and visitors alike, met Henry at the Cape Cod Culinary Institute and immediately became an FTC volunteer. “I helped them open up at the Riverway, and now our products are sold in the market,” says Rogers. “Having the Family Table Collaborative as one of our first wholesale partners is just great. I was proactively seeking ways to give back to the community, so partnering with them has been amazing.”

Wheeler, who has an MBA from Babson with a focus on social entrepreneurship, says the goal of FTC is sustainable change in an area that faces challenges in terms of a seasonal economy, minimal public transportation, and a lack of affordable housing. “We want to move the needle, and we believe that requires a combination of prepared foods and education,” she says. “Most people know the story: ‘Is it better to give a man a fish or teach him to fish?’ We truly believe you must do both.”

FTC values the incredible resources available on Cape Cod, both in terms of products and people. “We are building an extraordinary partnership between philanthropy and entrepreneurship to help end hunger and increase nutritional security on the Cape,” sums up Wheeler. It’s a lofty goal, but Wheeler and Henry believe they have all the ingredients to do it. 📍

Family Table Collaborative

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Your donation can help. Together, we can solve the problem of hunger and increase nutritional security on Cape Cod.



Prepared meal to take home:
COD PUTTANESCA



Ceviche - My Way!

“Fresh, fresh, fresh! Freshness absolutely matters in this dish!”
—Jeni Wheeler

Ingredients:

Salmon	Lime juice	Slivered almonds
Cod loin	Red onion	Pepitas
Squid	Edamame	Popcorn
Bay scallops	Red bell pepper	Adobo
Shrimp	Roasted corn	Sea salt
Fresh cilantro	Chickpeas	



- Purchase the freshest pieces of each fish. (Amounts vary depending on how many you’re serving. Assuming 4-6 people for an appetizer, go with 1/4 to 1/3 lb. of each.)
- The shrimp can be purchased cooked or cooked at home.
- Fine dice a small to medium red onion and place in a glass bowl.
- Cut up each of the fishes (raw) into small pieces and add to the bowl.
- Be sure to cut the squid (both tentacles and bodies) into small pieces.
- Cut up and add 1/2 bunch of fresh cilantro to the bowl and stir well.
- Cover with lime juice, stirring to ensure everything is marinating in it.
- Cover the bowl with Saran wrap and place in the fridge for an hour.
- Take out the bowl and stir. Add more lime juice to come up to the top of the fish.
- Add in the diced cooked shrimp.
- Dice 1/2 of a red pepper and add.
- Add 1/2 cup of edamame.
- Add 1/2 cup of roasted corn.
- Add 1/2 can of chickpeas.
- Sprinkle with sea salt.
- Sprinkle with adobo.
- Stir all together and re-cover. Place in the fridge for another hour.
- Take it out. Stir and taste. Add more spice to taste.
- Dole out servings and top with slivered almonds, pepitas, and popcorn.
- Serve immediately.