The MacDowell Recipe

If you were lucky enough to find temporary work as a red-tailed hawk, there could be worse places to drift over than Peterborough, New Hampshire. Certainly you wouldn’t be the first who wanted to drop down and stay for a while. And in the last century, as it turns out, at least six thousand other living creatures—and counting—have had similar designs on one parcel of land. Hawk or human, once they’ve touched down, very few want to leave.

What you would see from overhead: a hilly terrain patchworked with small pastures and great lengths of dark woods, a sort of flinty Hapsburg-style hunting preserve. This being the heart of New England, the view has a knack for shifting day to day, some combination of retreating or advancing snow, brightening or darkening foliage, feeding or fleeing fauna, not to mention what’s in the sky: some variety of bird migrating in one direction or the other. Yet one thing about this five hundred acres has not changed in a long while. Swoop closer and you would spot something highly unusual. Nestled under the trees are thirty-odd man-made structures, and inside there’s a year-round, permanent fixture: painters in the act of painting, along with writers writing, composers composing, sculptors sculpting. Any season, any day of any week, any of the last hundred years, you’d catch an artist in the act.

What you’ve come across is the oldest artist colony in the United States. The MacDowell Colony, established in 1904, may be the nearest thing to a refuge that any freewheeling hawk (or nonhawk) is likely to find in our otherwise fast-accelerating world. The artists weren’t the first to arrive. The Abenaki Indian tribe once roamed these same hills, as did a band of Portuguese sheep farmers. Each has had a hand in shaping the gracefully scaled pastures, which are sized and plotted as if this were a Frederick Law Olmsted–designed park.

It would be to your advantage to drift lower, among the modest studios perched at the edge of pastures, tucked in the woods, riding slabs of New Hampshire granite. Time it just right, which would be around lunchtime, and you might be able to meet the artist working inside to the basket lunch that’s been left at her door. This would be a great stroke of luck, as the artist within is always ravenous, looking for a break from the hard labor. Not to mention that the lunch is invariably good. (It’s not easy resisting the wicker basket packed—as my first lunch arrived—with a hearty BLT, Waldorf salad, squash soup, carrot sticks, cut radishes, and hazelnut cookies.)

For many reasons, the MacDowell Colony occupies storied status on North America’s cultural landscape, having in the last century provided artistic sanctuary for the likes of Thornton Wilder, Willa Cather, Aaron Copland, Milton Avery, Leonard Bernstein, and more recently Meredith Monk, Wendy Wasserstein, and Jonathan Franzen. The list of luminaries goes on and on, with no sign of abating. It’s impossible not to be seduced by the surroundings. Yet there’s an unsung ingredient—as crucial to the colony’s recipe as any gorgeous landscape or wild talent—that keeps the place thriving, humming, buoyant. It’s what’s produced in a twenty-four-by-thirty-foot room painted canary yellow, and which in the proper hands makes it as much an artist studio as any other on the property. Welcome to the colony kitchen.

Breakfast at the colony is the least ritualized meal of the day, an open window each morning—7:30 to 8:30—where residents can drop in and fortify themselves for a long day of creation. At first I ignored the bounty. I felt very lucky to have been offered a summer residency at MacDowell, but also terribly unhappy. Some recent misfortune had tagged after me over the New Hampshire border. A month before, in unceremonious, shattering fashion, I’d had my heart broken to pieces. Eating was the farthest thing from my mind. Instead of bounding out of bed for breakfast, I was trying to sleep off the despair. Grief may haunt one’s dreams, the thinking ran, but it’s neither as immediate nor as searing as the fully awake version. After a week of body and soul shutdown—closer, I was, to a hibernating black bear than any working writer—at sunup I dragged myself from under the covers and biked the dirt road to Colony Hall.
Three square meals come out of the MacDowell kitchen every day of the year, the years now numbering near a century’s worth. That’s a whole lot of cooking and a great number of mouths that have been fed. At first glance the colony kitchen may not look up to the job. This is not anything like a restaurant kitchen outfitted with stainless-steel worktables and banks of burners. This kitchen, instead, could as easily be the one in your home. Against one wall is a long, narrow table along which the meals are plated and lunch-boxes are filled; along the opposite wall, a six-burner stove with an adjoining griddle. Down the middle sits the kitchen’s nerve center, a large butcher-block table where ingredients are in some manner addressed: cut up, whipped, picked, mixed, and parlayed finally into a balanced meal. Above the table loom shelves of spices—mirroring the increasing sophistication or at least curiosity of our palates—and put to everyday use. At the far end of the room, like an escape valve that every kitchen should be fitted with, waits a screen porch. On hot summer nights, after the artists have been fed and cleaned up after, the murmur of voices and cutlery drifts from the sky-darkened enclosure. The staff is winding down. Meanwhile, the kitchen itself glows amber through the windows, like a giant nightlight to keep the insomniacs fed and cleaned up after, the murmur of voices and cutlery drifts from the sky-darkened enclosure. The staff is winding down. Meanwhile, the kitchen itself glows amber through the windows, like a giant nightlight to keep the insomniacs and neurotics (all of us!) in some version of calm.

Considering the breakfast that comes out of the kitchen, it’s not a surprise to find that the man making your meal is a creative type. Part-time morning cook Paul Hartnecky, a writer, can cut up Descartes as effortlessly as he can mince onions for your western omelette. Physically, he’s an imposing man—bearded, spectacled—until you hear what comes out of his mouth, the sort of benevolent force best equipped to watch after delicate artist types, let alone a colonist nursing heartache. As he puts it, “Artists are sensitive and that leads to all areas, including what they eat.”

Paul landed in the kitchen because he thought it would be the best place to face down the midlife demons. He asked himself, with a refreshing candor that he shared with me, “Can I change? How adaptable am I? How strong? In a kitchen you enter a situation that has physicality, challenge, intimacy.” Though Paul describes his own happy marriage, he finds that kitchen work fills out a hunger to be both the object and the provider of ongoing nurture. And this is especially the case with the MacDowell kitchen. Unlike a restaurant kitchen where the bottom line and efficiency are paramount, this variety of cooking focuses on healthful, sometimes experimental fare, without the furious time pressure. Hartnecky finds the gratification of cooking “immediate, ephemeral, biological, more multisensory” than aesthetic production. “Plus,” he adds, “you get to see people react as you never do with a piece of published writing.”

When I began to make it to breakfast, I filled a mug from the thermos of coffee that gets replenished all day, then ducked into the kitchen to place an order. The classics are well represented: French toast, pancakes, omelets, oatmeal with cream, with the occasional fresh herb frittata or huevos rancheros (which the kitchen staff will proudly tell you is Gourmet editor Ruth Reichl’s favorite). Many colonists fill a bowl with fresh fruit, and join the others breakfasting. There’s quiet chatter, less often about specific work problems than a freewheeling cross-pollination of ideas among mediums. Of course there’s always gossip. All of this at one of the dining room’s long wooden tables—a simple hot meal, low-key conversation, a view over a broad pasture, above all an abiding quiet—it has the effect of slowly, surely sloughing off a layer of skin badly in need of leaving behind.

It’s safe to say that the MacDowells—Marian and Edward—had some version of this sloughing off in mind when they first descended on the wilds of New Hampshire. The two of them met in Italy, when Marian, the daughter of a New York banker, arrived at age twenty-three to learn the piano. Edward MacDowell, one of America’s leading composers of the late nineteenth century, stepped in for the sick Italian who’d been designated Marian’s teacher. Within two years they decided to marry, but Marian drove what to many might sound like a dream bargain: she would marry him only if he lived off of her inheritance for five years. The idea was that Edward shear away the distractions of making a living and only write music. Furthermore, part of her vision had them repairing to the quiet of Peterborough, where she had bought a parcel of land and an old farmhouse. It was then that Edward MacDowell entered the most productive period of his brief life.

Unfortunately, things unraveled. MacDowell broke with his wife’s directive, returning to New York City to lead Columbia University’s new music department. He was apparently ardently about whatever he committed himself to, so that teaching took up many of his working hours. When the university changed presidents, MacDowell clashed with the new man and quickly resigned. The spat over his departure hit the city newspapers, embarrassment ensued, and the entire incident sent MacDowell into a tailspin. The couple returned to Peterborough. Marian had the first studio built for her husband, and the two of them conceived of the colony. On his deathbed, at age forty-six, he is believed to have made a last request: that “MacDowell” be made a reality.

Left: Maryel Chabot in the kitchen.

Courtesy of the MacDowell Colony; Photograph by Joanna Eldredge Morrissey © 2005.
And reality is what Marian made. She proceeded—for the following fifty years—to be the driving force behind the creation, realization, and self-perpetuation of the colony. Protesting that she was merely “one of the help,” Marian was actually instrumental at every turn, from constant fundraising (through the MacDowell Clubs she set up across the country and the concerts she gave interpreting her husband’s music), to the placement and construction of studios around the acreage she was gradually accumulating, to the arts panels she set up to ensure the highest admissions standards.

Her brilliant idea—an art-making experience that cannot be found in the city—extended from the solitary workspace the colonists occupy during daylight hours right up to the stimulating conversation that a gang of artists have around a dinner table while passing platters of well-made, vividly flavored food. Artists continue to arrive from the cities, toting along not only bright and challenging ideas but also heavy doses of urban angst, neuroses, emotional chaos. Marian understood the eternal problem. She saw that her husband needed a refuge in which to create his best work, as she sensed the hazards of city living and how time away on her retreat would make those hazards fall away.

At MacDowell there is only one inviolable rule. You are forbidden from visiting another colonist’s studio unless you’re given express invitation. This may seem like a small detail, but the larger effect is profound. It means that your studio, tucked away on some corner of the immense property, is a space that only you touch. For me, during those first days, I had the sensation I was unfolding like a piece of origami. Clothes, books, manuscript pages, I spread out all over the space. The mess may have matched my internal ruin, but at the same time the hush of the woods and absolute privacy were getting the healing underway. Some ideas for a new novel began to flash. The studio was becoming peopled with characters, though anyone peeking through the window would have diagnosed schizophrenia. I hollered “Hallelujah!” when a real character stepped onto my front porch in the middle of the first day. He was delivering my basket lunch, and he would return with it every day thereafter.

Blake Tewksbury is almost as much a MacDowell institution as the old grand dame herself. He lurches up in an old green pick-up truck—as he’s done for seventeen years—drops your lunch basket, and projects a kindliness and a gentleness that seem not of our era. He fits perfectly the colony’s nurturing climate and out-of-time sensation. In Blake’s presence you get the sense that you’re being watched over by yet one more benevolent force, as if he were one of the great hardwoods that grace the property. His hair is frost white; his eyes, steely blue and steady. He moves at a serenely slow, determined pace. When he delivers lunch, it is in inconspicuous, almost ghostlike fashion. Some paragraph can be giving you fits, and you wouldn’t know he’s come and gone.

But hunger of course strikes at about this time, and most colonists hit their lunch basket like one of the gray wolves that slink the local hills. I was there at the height of summer, so I would sit out on my screen porch and unpack the lunch, arranging its many surprises along the arm of an Adirondack-style chair. Each studio has its own designated basket: old-fashioned, white ash wicker, twin-handled, and with a wooden flap painted by a staff dishwasher (and maybe the next Edward Hopper). What you find inside further taps the deep vein of nostalgia. There are two seventies-style plastic thermoses, one filled with hot soup, the other with iced tea or coffee. Wrapped in wax paper—wax paper!—are celery and carrot sticks. The entrée is typically a thick and gusby sandwich: curried chicken salad or roasted eggplant or a nice wedge of cheddar cheese lined with thin-sliced cornichon. Always there’s some dessert (unless otherwise requested)—a cookie or, if you’re lucky, a homemade whoopee pie. A piece of fresh fruit keeps the meal oriented toward healthful.

To have such wonderful food made and served to you would appear to be the absolute height of luxury and indulgence, but I had a hard time at first. I was contending with the prominent place food occupies in my city head. My city day, I was beginning to realize, is arranged around food: not just the eating but the dreaming over a prospective meal, the shopping for ingredients, the preparing, followed by the cleanup. It’s a creative outlet that I relish. Yet it didn’t take long to see how time and imagination were freed up for the novel writing. Suddenly the days felt a third again longer, the mind approaching some new, uncluttered state. Here was the psychic space to really make something. After an afternoon nap I biked to the kitchen with an empty lunch basket looped to the handlebars.

Finally comes dinner, which at MacDowell maintains a number of New England traditions that keep it lodged in what might seem an earlier era. First there is the hour of eating. A paint-can-sized dinner bell, heard on the far reaches of the property, gets rung at 6:30 p.m., then again at 6:50 when dinner is served. Surprisingly, the early hour is quickly adjusted to, even if summer sun still glances through the windows. Each of the five dining room tables gets filled. There is no television or radio running, no rush to get anywhere. Who sits at your table is a nightly wild card, with lively conversation a given; stuck away in a silent studio all day, colonists are famished for connection. Rumor had it there were “silent tables” in the past, where the day’s
perfect quiet was carried over. Not during my stint. We were like a bunch of blue jays dying to peck and palaver.

Local high school kids serve as “kitchen assistants,” their duties including cleaning up lunch baskets, serving dinner, and washing dishes, pots, pans. Their bright faces advance the sensation that you’re back in the dreamy summer camp of your youth. Still, the contemporary moment peeks through.

One recent kitchen assistant, Anastasia Dubrovina, sixteen, arrived in Peterborough from Russia after a Peterborough native located her mother—can you say mail-order bride?—on the Internet. The job has spurred her interest in lighting out for New York, where she’s observed many of the colonists come from, and in trailing out her creative passion, which is for high vintage fashion.

The colonists seat themselves a minute or two after the 6:30 bell, at which point the kitchen assistants descend. They set down large oval platters of food that are then passed around the table. Dinner is a surprise, one of the few not of your own creative making in this serenely routinized place (that is, unless you have the savvy nose that can pick up what’s been wafting through the woods across the afternoon). The meals can range from old New England, for example a Sunday pot roast, which I can’t stop trying to duplicate in my city kitchen, to the absolutely foreign and current, like chili-rubbed salmon with peach and mango salsa and coconut rice or chicken tandoori with banana chutney and samosas. A mixed field green salad accompanies every dinner. A bottle of wine or two—supplied by the odd colonist who’s snuck off grounds to the New Hampshire State Liquor Store—might appear on the table to be passed around. As with lunch, there is always a homemade dessert to follow—fresh peach pie, chocolate cake, or a bowl of fresh raspberries.

Certainly, shifting dietary trends and increasingly sophisticated palates have influenced what comes out of the MacDowell kitchen. As one of the older cooks put it, “back then, the artists talked more about their work than the food, which is often a topic of conversation today.” A standard dessert in the 1960s might have been chocolate chip cheese-cake on an Oreo cookie crust or homemade brownies with vanilla ice cream, where today it would be warm chocolate
cake served with strawberry coulis. The poet Honor Moore makes a distinction about how things have changed since she started coming to MacDowell in 1977: “We had meat and potatoes and overcooked veggies and everybody got drunk. There was a lot more drinking, a bottle of wine on every table.” Well, not only do the artists lean more abstemious, but also more dietarily restricted. A recent poet requested that she be served “no nightshades, and nothing white.” Still, the fussy (and vegetarians) are treated with respect, special plates made up and placed wherever they choose to sit. Over the years the kitchen has worked hard to follow changing diets and the wider array of demands.

Scott Tyle, head chef, is one more MacDowell employee bent on taking care. Maybe we all have a hankering to nurture those around us, but MacDowell is stocked with people who have a talent for this. Tyle has the rangy, lean frame and crew cut of a marine sergeant. I expected him to bark at me, but his twinkly eyes and gentle manner placed him firmly in a now familiar mold: expertise wielded with benevolence. His cooking is similarly straight-shooting and expert—what he calls “classical with variations”—and he keeps a close eye on his crew. Anastasia says he often checks in about the status of her troubled relationship with her stepfather. In the kitchen, she adds, he likes to sing and dance. There’s an unspoken formula of respect being paid every which way, making the MacDowell experience a quietly extraordinary one.

By summer’s end I felt like a transformed man. Despite the regular square meals I relished three times a day, I was as trim as I’ve ever been. The daily swims a group of us took in a nearby lake were an extension of the healthy country living. The unfolding of myself: this continued along with each day. All of the people who keep MacDowell running as they watch over the place and everyone fortunate enough to visit fall under a special category—they’re Life Instructors. Daily they teach, without appearing to teach, the myriad ways we can take better care of ourselves. A century ago Marian and Edward were lucky or smart enough to get the formula just right. They created a very large piece of art, one that encourages our best parts to step forward. These parts of yourself may well be newly discovered. And the hope, upon return to the hustle of civilian life, is that those parts are here to stay.

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**MacDowell Colony Whoopee Pies**

**Makes 30**

Here is a recipe not to pass up, circa 1968. Nobody really knows its exact provenance; there’s no proprietary impulse to the services rendered at the colony. The MacDowell whoopee pie has been perfected over the years—so many sensitive palates!—the ideal conclusion to a virtuous lunch.

**The Cookies**

1 cup shortening  
3 cups sugar  
4 eggs  
2 teaspoons vanilla  
5 1/2 cups flour  
1 teaspoon salt  
2 teaspoons baking soda  
1 cup cocoa  
1 cup sour milk

Cream shortening and sugar. Add eggs, beaten, and vanilla. Sift and add flour, salt, soda, and cocoa. Add sour milk last and mix well. Bake 12 minutes at 350°F.

**The Filling**

3 tablespoons flour  
2 tablespoons corn starch  
1 cup milk  
1 cup butter  
1 cup sugar  
2 teaspoon vanilla

Cook flour, corn starch, and milk until a very thick paste forms. Then add butter, sugar, and vanilla, and beat until very light. Then fill. These freeze well.