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Heritage Kitchen Foundations

Traditional Methods for Today's Home

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Heritage Kitchen Foundations

First Edition

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The methods in this book are based on historical practices documented before 1900. Always use proper food safety practices and consult current guidelines when preserving food.

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction: Why the Old Ways Matter..... | 1 |
| Chapter 1: The Heritage Kitchen Pantry..... | 7 |
| Chapter 2: Sourdough Foundations..... | 15 |
| Chapter 3: The Art of Fermentation..... | 31 |
| Chapter 4: Butter, Cream & Cheese..... | 47 |
| Chapter 5: Stocks & Bone Broths..... | 59 |
| Chapter 6: Preservation Methods..... | 69 |
| Chapter 7: Ancient Grains..... | 83 |
| Chapter 8: The Heritage Garden..... | 93 |
| Appendix: Seasonal Kitchen Calendar..... | 103 |
| Sources & Historical References..... | 107 |

Introduction

Why the Old Ways Matter

Your great-grandmother didn't have a refrigerator. She didn't have a microwave, a food processor, or plastic wrap. She didn't have access to vegetables shipped from three continents away or bread that stayed "fresh" for weeks.

And yet she fed her family. She preserved the harvest. She kept a sourdough starter alive through winters. She made butter by hand, fermented vegetables in crocks, and rendered lard that lasted all year.

She possessed knowledge that we have largely forgotten—knowledge passed down through generations, refined over centuries, and then abandoned in the span of a few decades.

This book is about reclaiming that knowledge.

The Great Forgetting

Between 1950 and 1980, something remarkable happened in American kitchens. Convenience foods replaced scratch cooking. Grocery stores replaced root cellars. Industrial processes replaced ancestral knowledge.

Consider what was lost: The average American household in 1900 knew how to make bread from wild-captured yeast, preserve vegetables through lacto-fermentation, render animal fats, culture dairy, and store food without refrigeration. By 1980, most of these skills had vanished from common practice.

We traded knowledge for convenience. And we're only now beginning to understand the cost.

What We Lost

Industrial food processing doesn't just change how food is made—it changes the food itself.

- Modern bread uses commercial yeast that works in hours; traditional sourdough ferments for 12-24 hours, breaking down phytic acid and gluten proteins
- Pasteurized, homogenized milk lacks the enzymes present in raw dairy that aid digestion
- Refined vegetable oils replaced traditional animal fats that humans consumed for millennia
- Canned vegetables replaced lacto-fermented ones, eliminating beneficial probiotics
- Refined white flour replaced whole grain flours, removing fiber and nutrients

The result? A population that consumes more calories than ever while remaining nutritionally depleted. Digestive disorders that barely existed a century ago are now commonplace. Food allergies and sensitivities have multiplied.

The Return to Heritage

This book isn't about nostalgia. It's about nutrition, flavor, and self-sufficiency.

Heritage methods work. They've been tested not by laboratories but by generations—by families who depended on them for survival. The sourdough process that makes bread more digestible, the lacto-

fermentation that preserves vegetables and creates probiotics, the slow-simmered bone broths that extract minerals and collagen—these techniques emerged because they produced results.

In the following chapters, you'll learn the foundational skills of the heritage kitchen: how to capture wild yeast and maintain a sourdough starter, how to ferment vegetables safely, how to make cultured butter and simple cheeses, how to create rich stocks and broths, and how to preserve the harvest using methods that predate refrigeration.

These are not difficult skills. Your great-grandmother learned them as a child. With practice, they will become second nature to you as well.

Welcome home to the old ways.

Chapter 1

The Heritage Kitchen Pantry

Before you begin cooking in the heritage tradition, you need to stock your pantry differently than a modern kitchen. The ingredients matter—not just for authenticity, but for results.

Fats: The Foundation

Pre-industrial kitchens ran on animal fats. Lard (rendered pig fat), tallow (rendered beef fat), butter, and schmaltz (rendered chicken fat) were the primary cooking fats for thousands of years.

Lard

Properly rendered lard from pasture-raised pigs is a nutritional powerhouse. It contains high levels of vitamin D (when pigs have sun exposure), is rich in oleic acid (the same heart-healthy fat in olive oil), and has a high smoke point ideal for frying.

There are two types of lard: leaf lard (from around the kidneys, prized for pastry) and back fat lard (from the fatback, better for general cooking). Learn to render your own, or source from local farms raising heritage breed pigs.

Butter

Use real butter—preferably from grass-fed cows, ideally cultured (fermented before churning). Cultured butter has a more complex flavor and contains beneficial bacteria. Kerrygold is a widely

available grass-fed option; better still is butter from a local dairy or your own churn.

Never use margarine or "butter spreads." These industrial products didn't exist before the 20th century and have no place in a heritage kitchen.

Tallow

Beef tallow was the primary frying fat in America until the 1980s—McDonald's original fries were cooked in it. Like lard, properly rendered tallow from grass-fed cattle is nutritious and stable for high-heat cooking.

Salt: The Preserver

Salt is the most important ingredient in preservation. But not all salt is equal.

Use unrefined sea salt or mined salt (like Redmond Real Salt) that contains trace minerals. Avoid table salt, which is heavily processed and contains anti-caking agents. For fermentation, use salt without iodine added—iodine can inhibit fermentation.

Keep several types: fine sea salt for general cooking, coarse salt for fermentation and curing, and flaky finishing salt for the table.

Flour: Ancient Grains

Modern wheat has been hybridized for yield and gluten strength, not nutrition or digestibility. Heritage kitchens used different grains entirely.

- Einkorn: The oldest cultivated wheat, never hybridized, lower in gluten and higher in protein

- Emmer (Farro): Ancient wheat with excellent nutrition, nutty flavor
- Spelt: Medieval European staple, more water-soluble gluten
- Rye: Traditional bread grain, particularly in Northern Europe
- Buckwheat: Not actually wheat, gluten-free, common in Eastern European cooking

Source stone-ground flours when possible—modern roller mills heat the grain, degrading nutrients and oils. Stone-ground flour should be stored in the refrigerator or freezer.

Sweeteners

Refined white sugar is a modern invention. Heritage kitchens used:

- Honey: The oldest sweetener, with antimicrobial properties
- Maple syrup: Traditional in North America
- Molasses: Byproduct of sugar refining, rich in minerals
- Rapadura/Sucanat: Unrefined cane sugar with molasses intact
- Sorghum syrup: Southern American tradition

Dairy

If possible, source raw (unpasteurized) dairy from a trusted local farm. Raw milk contains enzymes that aid digestion—enzymes destroyed by pasteurization. Many people who cannot tolerate pasteurized dairy do fine with raw.

At minimum, choose non-homogenized milk (cream-top) and full-fat dairy. The low-fat dairy trend has no historical precedent; traditional cultures prized the cream.

Chapter 2

Sourdough Foundations

For thousands of years, all leavened bread was sourdough. The concept of "quick" bread made with commercial yeast is barely 150 years old. Before that, every loaf rose through the patient work of wild yeast and bacteria captured from the air and flour.

Why Sourdough Matters

Sourdough isn't just about flavor—though the flavor is magnificent. The long fermentation process transforms the grain in ways that commercial yeast cannot.

- **Phytic acid reduction:** Grains contain phytic acid, which binds to minerals and prevents absorption. Sourdough fermentation breaks down phytic acid, making minerals bioavailable.
- **Gluten pre-digestion:** The long fermentation partially breaks down gluten proteins, making sourdough more digestible—even for some with gluten sensitivity.
- **Lower glycemic index:** Sourdough bread causes a slower, lower blood sugar response than commercial bread.
- **Natural preservation:** The acidity of sourdough inhibits mold growth, allowing bread to stay fresh longer without preservatives.
- **Beneficial bacteria:** A healthy sourdough starter contains lactobacillus bacteria that produce lactic acid and other beneficial compounds.

Creating a Starter from Scratch

A sourdough starter is a living culture of wild yeast and bacteria. Creating one is simple—it just requires patience.

What You Need

- Whole grain flour (rye or whole wheat work best to start—more wild yeast on the bran)
- Unchlorinated water (chlorine kills microorganisms)
- A glass jar
- A kitchen scale
- Patience (7-14 days)

Day 1

Combine 50g whole grain flour with 50g water in your jar. Mix thoroughly. Cover loosely (a cloth secured with a rubber band, or a lid set on top without sealing). Leave at room temperature (70-75°F ideal).

Days 2-3

You may see some bubbles, or you may not. The mixture may smell slightly sour, or yeasty, or even unpleasant. This is normal—various microorganisms are competing for dominance.

Each day, discard half the mixture (this prevents the jar from overflowing and maintains the right consistency). Add 50g flour and 50g water. Mix, cover, wait.

Days 4-7

The starter should begin showing more consistent activity: bubbles throughout, a pleasant sour smell, rising and falling predictably. Continue daily feedings, discarding half before each feed.

If your starter develops a pink or orange tinge, or smells putrid, discard it and start over. A healthy starter smells pleasantly sour, like yogurt or beer.

Days 7-14

Your starter is ready when it reliably doubles in size within 4-8 hours of feeding, has a pleasant sour aroma, and shows consistent bubble activity.

The "float test": Drop a small spoonful of starter into water. If it floats, there's enough gas trapped inside and your starter is ready to leaven bread.

Maintaining Your Starter

A mature starter is remarkably resilient. You have two maintenance options:

Room Temperature (Daily Baking)

If you bake frequently, keep your starter at room temperature and feed daily. Use or discard all but 50g, then add 50g flour and 50g water. The starter will be ready to use 4-8 hours after feeding.

Refrigerated (Weekly Baking)

For less frequent baking, refrigerate your starter. Feed it, let it rise for an hour at room temperature, then refrigerate. It will keep for 1-2 weeks. To use, remove from refrigerator, feed, and allow to fully

activate at room temperature (12-24 hours) before baking.

Basic Sourdough Bread

This is the simplest sourdough loaf—flour, water, salt, and starter. Master this before attempting more complex recipes.

Ingredients

- 100g active sourdough starter
- 375g water
- 500g bread flour (or mix of bread flour and whole wheat)
- 10g fine sea salt

Method

Morning: Mix starter and water until dispersed. Add flour, mix until no dry flour remains. Rest 30 minutes (autolyse).

Add salt, pinch and fold to incorporate. Over the next 3-4 hours, perform stretch-and-folds every 30 minutes: wet your hand, grab one side of the dough, stretch up, fold over. Rotate bowl 90°, repeat. Four folds = one set.

After bulk fermentation (dough should be puffy, increased 50% in volume, showing bubbles), shape into a round. Place seam-side up in a floured banneton or towel-lined bowl.

Refrigerate overnight (8-15 hours). This cold retard develops flavor and makes the dough easier to handle.

Next morning: Preheat oven to 500°F with a Dutch oven inside (45 minutes minimum). Turn dough onto parchment, score the top, lower into hot Dutch oven. Bake covered 20 minutes, uncover, reduce heat to 450°F, bake another 25-30 minutes until deep golden brown.

Cool completely before cutting—at least one hour. The bread is still cooking inside.

Chapter 3

The Art of Fermentation

Before refrigeration, fermentation was how humans preserved vegetables. Sauerkraut, kimchi, pickles, relishes—these weren't condiments. They were survival food, ways to carry the harvest through winter.

The process is called lacto-fermentation, named for the lactobacillus bacteria that do the work. These beneficial bacteria convert sugars into lactic acid, which preserves the food and creates that characteristic tangy flavor.

The Science

Lacto-fermentation is beautifully simple. Lactobacillus bacteria are present on all fresh vegetables. In an anaerobic (oxygen-free), salty environment, they thrive while harmful bacteria cannot.

The salt draws moisture from the vegetables through osmosis, creating a brine. The lactobacillus consume sugars and produce lactic acid, lowering the pH. As acidity increases, the environment becomes hostile to pathogenic bacteria, molds, and yeasts.

The result: a preserved food that is actually more nutritious than raw vegetables, containing beneficial probiotics and increased bioavailability of vitamins.

Basic Sauerkraut

Sauerkraut is the foundation of fermentation. If you can make sauerkraut, you can ferment almost anything.

Ingredients

- 1 medium cabbage (about 2 lbs)
- 1 tablespoon fine sea salt (non-iodized)

That's it. Two ingredients.

Method

Remove outer leaves from cabbage (save one). Quarter, remove core, slice thin (1/8 inch). Place in large bowl.

Add salt. Massage cabbage firmly with your hands, squeezing and pressing, for 5-10 minutes. The cabbage will release liquid and reduce in volume by half.

Pack tightly into a clean quart jar, pressing down firmly after each handful. Liquid should rise above the cabbage. Place the reserved cabbage leaf on top, then weight down (a smaller jar filled with water works).

Cover with a cloth. The cabbage must stay submerged—check daily, press down if needed.

Ferment at room temperature for 1-4 weeks, tasting periodically. When it reaches your desired tanginess, remove weight, cap tightly, refrigerate. It will keep for months.

Fermentation Ratios

The magic ratio for vegetable fermentation is 2% salt by weight. For every 100 grams of vegetables, use 2 grams of salt.

For brine fermentation (vegetables in liquid, like pickles), use a 2-3% brine: 20-30 grams of salt per liter of water.

What to Ferment

- Cabbage → Sauerkraut, kimchi
- Cucumbers → Traditional pickles
- Carrots → Fermented sticks or shreds
- Beets → Kvass (fermented beet juice)
- Garlic → Fermented garlic (mellows the flavor)
- Hot peppers → Fermented hot sauce
- Mixed vegetables → Giardiniera
- Radishes, turnips, onions, green beans...

Nearly any vegetable can be fermented. Start with sauerkraut, then experiment.

Chapter 4

Butter, Cream & Cheese

Making butter is perhaps the simplest transformation in the kitchen—cream becomes butter through nothing but agitation. Yet this simple act connects you to thousands of years of dairy tradition.

Making Butter

Butter is cream that has been churned until the fat globules clump together, separating from the liquid buttermilk.

Sweet Cream Butter

Pour heavy cream into a jar, filling halfway. Cap tightly. Shake. Keep shaking. After 10-20 minutes of vigorous shaking, the cream will thicken, then suddenly separate—butter clumps swimming in thin buttermilk.

Drain the buttermilk (save it for baking). Rinse the butter under cold water, kneading to press out remaining buttermilk. If buttermilk remains, the butter will spoil quickly.

Add salt if desired (1/4 teaspoon per stick of butter). Shape, wrap, refrigerate. Homemade butter keeps 2-3 weeks refrigerated.

Cultured Butter

For butter with deeper flavor and beneficial bacteria, culture the cream first. Add 2 tablespoons of cultured buttermilk or plain yogurt to one pint of

cream. Leave at room temperature for 12-24 hours until thickened and tangy. Then churn as above.

Cultured butter has a more complex, tangy flavor and was the standard in Europe for centuries. The culturing also extends shelf life.

Simple Fresh Cheese

Before aged cheeses, there was fresh cheese—milk curdled with acid, drained, and eaten immediately. This is the origin of ricotta, paneer, queso fresco, and farmer's cheese.

Farmer's Cheese (Quark)

Heat one gallon of whole milk to 180°F. Remove from heat. Add 1/4 cup lemon juice or white vinegar. Stir gently. Let sit 10 minutes.

Curds will separate from whey. Line a colander with cheesecloth, pour in the mixture, let drain 1-2 hours. Gather cheesecloth, squeeze gently to remove more whey.

Salt to taste. Use immediately or refrigerate up to one week. This soft, spreadable cheese works for both sweet and savory applications.

Clotted Cream

A British tradition dating to at least the 14th century. Pour heavy cream into a shallow baking dish. Bake at 180°F for 8-12 hours. A thick, golden crust forms on top. Cool, refrigerate overnight. Skim the clotted layer from the top.

Serve with scones and jam, or anywhere you'd use butter or whipped cream.

Chapter 5

Stocks & Bone Broths

In traditional kitchens, nothing was wasted. Bones, scraps, and trimmings became stock—the foundation of soups, sauces, and braises. A pot of stock simmering on the back of the stove was a constant presence.

Stock vs. Broth vs. Bone Broth

These terms are often confused. Here's the distinction:

- **Stock:** Made from bones with some meat, simmered 4-6 hours, used as a cooking base
- **Broth:** Made primarily from meat, shorter cooking time, meant for sipping
- **Bone broth:** Modern term for long-simmered stock (12-48 hours) to extract maximum collagen and minerals

For heritage cooking purposes, we're making stock—but simmered long enough to extract the benefits of bone broth.

Basic Bone Stock

Ingredients

- 3-4 lbs bones (chicken, beef, pork, or mixed)
- 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- 1 onion, quartered
- 2 carrots, rough chopped
- 2 celery stalks, rough chopped

- A few peppercorns, bay leaves, thyme
- Water to cover

Method

For beef or pork bones: Roast at 400°F for 30-40 minutes until browned. This develops flavor through the Maillard reaction.

Place bones in large pot. Add vinegar and let sit 30 minutes—the acid helps extract minerals from the bones.

Add vegetables and aromatics. Cover with cold water by 2 inches. Bring to a gentle simmer—never a rolling boil, which makes stock cloudy.

Simmer: Chicken stock 6-8 hours. Beef/pork stock 12-24 hours. Skim any foam that rises.

Strain through fine mesh. Cool, refrigerate. A layer of fat will solidify on top—this is good fat for cooking. Remove or leave as a protective seal.

Good stock should gel when chilled—that's the collagen extracted from the bones.

Using Stock

Heritage cooks used stock for everything:

- Cooking grains (rice, farro, barley)
- Braising meats and vegetables
- Building sauces
- Making soups
- Sipping plain, especially during illness

Keep a container in your freezer for bones and vegetable scraps. When full, make stock.

Chapter 6

Preservation Methods

Before refrigeration and year-round shipping, preserving the harvest was essential for survival. Multiple methods were used, often in combination.

Drying

The oldest preservation method. Remove moisture, and bacteria cannot grow.

Herbs

Bundle and hang upside down in a warm, dry, well-ventilated space. Or lay flat on screens. When completely dry (crumbles easily), store in airtight containers away from light.

Fruits

Slice thin, lay on racks, dry in warm oven (170°F) with door cracked, or in a dehydrator, or in hot sun covered with cheesecloth. Dried fruit should be leathery, not sticky.

Vegetables

Many vegetables were traditionally dried: beans, peas, corn, peppers, tomatoes, mushrooms. Blanch first (brief boiling, then ice bath) to preserve color and nutrition.

Salt Curing

Salt draws moisture from food, creating an environment hostile to bacteria.

Salt Pork

The original preserved meat. Pack pork belly or fatback in a crock, covering completely with salt. Store in a cool place. The meat will keep for months. Rinse before cooking.

Gravlax

Cure salmon with a mixture of salt, sugar, and dill for 48-72 hours. Slice thin and serve.

Root Cellaring

Before refrigeration, root cellars kept produce through winter. The principles: cool temperatures (32-40°F), high humidity (80-95%), and darkness.

Root vegetables store best: carrots, beets, turnips, parsnips, potatoes, onions, garlic. Pack in sand or sawdust in a cool basement, garage, or outdoor pit.

Apples, pears, and winter squash also store well in cool, dark conditions. Check regularly for spoilage—one bad apple truly does spoil the barrel.

Smoking

Smoke preserves through several mechanisms: drying, antimicrobial compounds in the smoke, and a protective coating on the surface.

Traditional smoking requires a smokehouse or improvised smoker. Cold smoking (below 90°F)

preserves without cooking. Hot smoking cooks and flavors. Fish, ham, bacon, and sausages were traditionally preserved this way.

Chapter 7

Ancient Grains

Modern wheat is a 20th-century creation, bred for high yield, pest resistance, and strong gluten for industrial bread production. It bears little resemblance to the grains our ancestors ate.

Einkorn

Einkorn (*Triticum monococcum*) is the oldest wheat variety, domesticated around 10,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent. It has never been hybridized.

- 14 chromosomes (modern wheat has 42)
- 30% more protein than modern wheat
- Higher in carotenoids, giving flour a golden color
- Lower in gluten, and different gluten structure
- Many people with wheat sensitivity tolerate einkorn

Einkorn flour behaves differently: it absorbs less water, has less elastic gluten, and works best in recipes developed for it. Start with pancakes, muffins, and quick breads before attempting yeasted breads.

Emmer (Farro)

Emmer was the primary wheat of ancient Egypt and Rome. It has 28 chromosomes—a natural hybrid of einkorn and wild grass that occurred in prehistoric times.

In Italy, emmer grain is called farro and remains a staple in traditional dishes. It has a nutty, chewy texture and can be cooked like rice or used in soups and salads.

Spelt

Spelt (*Triticum spelta*) was the dominant wheat in medieval Europe, particularly in Germany and Switzerland. It has 42 chromosomes but is not as heavily modified as modern wheat.

- More water-soluble gluten—easier to digest for some
- Higher in protein than modern wheat
- Harder outer hull provides natural pest protection
- Works as a 1:1 substitution in most recipes

Rye

Rye was the bread grain of Northern and Eastern Europe, where wheat struggled to grow. Dense, dark rye breads like pumpernickel sustained populations through long winters.

Rye flour has very weak gluten, so 100% rye breads are dense. Traditional rye breads are often sourdough—the acid helps tenderize the grain. Rye can be blended with wheat for lighter loaves.

Other Grains

- Buckwheat: Not a wheat at all, but a seed related to rhubarb. Gluten-free. Makes excellent pancakes and crepes.

- Oats: Steel-cut or rolled oats are minimally processed. Avoid "instant" oats.
- Barley: One of the oldest cultivated grains. Excellent in soups and as a rice substitute.
- Millet: Ancient grain, gluten-free, common in Africa and Asia.
- Teff: Tiny grain from Ethiopia, high in protein and calcium, makes injera bread.

Chapter 8

The Heritage Garden

A heritage kitchen begins in a heritage garden. Heirloom varieties, passed down through generations, offer flavors that modern hybrids cannot match.

Heirloom vs. Hybrid

Heirloom varieties are open-pollinated plants that breed true from seed—the same varieties your great-grandparents grew. Hybrids are crosses between different varieties, bred for specific traits like disease resistance or shipping durability.

Heirlooms are saved for flavor, nutrition, and adaptability to local conditions. When you save seed from heirlooms, you can plant that seed next year and get the same plant.

Essential Garden Herbs

These herbs were found in every heritage kitchen garden:

- Parsley: Flat-leaf Italian parsley for cooking, curly for garnish
- Thyme: Essential for stocks and braises
- Sage: For pork, poultry, and beans
- Rosemary: For lamb, bread, and roasted potatoes
- Dill: For pickles, fish, and fermentation
- Chives: Mild onion flavor for finishing dishes

- Mint: For tea, lamb, and preserves
- Chamomile: For tea and calming remedies
- Lavender: For baking and sachets

The Kitchen Garden Layout

Traditional kitchen gardens placed herbs and frequently harvested vegetables close to the kitchen door. Larger crops—squash, corn, potatoes—went in farther fields.

Consider these elements:

- Raised beds for improved drainage and easier harvesting
- Perennial herbs (thyme, sage, rosemary) in permanent locations
- Annual herbs (basil, dill, cilantro) rotated with vegetables
- Succession planting for continuous harvest
- Companion planting for pest control

Seed Saving

Before commercial seed companies, every farmer saved seed. This practice maintains genetic diversity and adapts varieties to local conditions.

Start with easy crops: beans, peas, tomatoes, peppers, lettuce. Allow a few plants to fully mature and go to seed. Harvest when dry, store in cool, dark conditions.

Appendix

Seasonal Kitchen Calendar

Spring

- Start sourdough if not already maintaining
- Plant herb garden and early vegetables
- Use last of preserved winter stores
- Forage for wild greens, ramps, nettles

Summer

- Ferment vegetables as they come in
- Make fruit preserves and jams
- Dry herbs when at peak
- Make and freeze stock from vegetable scraps

Fall

- Major fermentation season: sauerkraut, kimchi
- Store root vegetables
- Make apple cider and apple cider vinegar
- Render lard and tallow from fall butchering
- Make bone stock from soup bones

Winter

- Bake bread weekly
- Make stock from stored bones
- Enjoy fermented vegetables
- Plan spring garden
- Order heirloom seeds

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About Steading Home

Steading Home preserves and teaches the heritage kitchen arts—the skills your great-grandmother knew and we nearly lost.

Through recipes, courses, and guides, we help modern families come home to the old ways: real bread, fermented vegetables, cultured dairy, and food made with intention.

No shortcuts. No synthetics. Just real food, made the way humans have made it for generations.

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