



## IN THE KITCHEN WITH

# PRISCILLA RUFFIN

*The head of East End Hospice finds comfort in cooking her local ingredients just so.*

BY EILEEN M. DUFFY • PHOTOGRAPHS BY LINDSAY MORRIS

People react differently when you ask to be invited into their kitchen. One says, “Sure, come over whenever you want; I’ll decide what’s for dinner on my way home from work.” Another says, “No way.”

The other starts planning the menu weeks ahead of time, makes a comprehensive shopping list, invites her sisters, sets the table hours before and gets a bit nervous when the photographer is late because it throws off her schedule. I’m talking about Priscilla Ruffin, president of East End Hospice, registered nurse, botanical watercolorist and a very good cook.

At a dinner at her comfortable and pretty Westhampton home in mid-September, Ruffin focused on local ingredients, old favorites and ease of preparation, which given the seemingly complicated menu, sounded impossible; but she pulled it off with an attention to detail that her sister Darcy Paddock says has always been a part of “Prissy.”

“This is the way we do dinner,” says Ruffin. “Food, in the family, has always been important. My mother was a fabulous cook.”

Most people in the community know Ruffin from Hospice, where she has been for 22 years as president and CEO. There she is in charge of providing services, organizing and training volunteers, fund-raising and Camp Good Grief, which this year, its 12th, counseled and entertained 157 children who have lost a family member.

The path to Hospice seems ordained, says Ruffin, who went back to school to be a nurse when she lost her husband and found herself drawn to and recommended for jobs that put her in contact with the dying. This led to the move to Westhampton to East End Hospice, which is now expanding—a building for an in-house facility has been bought and is moving toward construction, and an office in the center of town has been added to the main building on Riverhead Road. The thrift shop, also on Riverhead Road, is still going strong.

Ruffin’s other sister, Susan Barnes, shows up with her husband, John, from the North Fork, but the photographer is still not there.





### PRISCILLA RUFFIN'S MARINADE RECIPE

Start with a good amount of honey, add teriyaki soy sauce, mix in a teaspoon or so of dry mustard, same of freshly grated ginger, some olive oil, a splash of white wine vinegar, same of a good bourbon, pepper, fresh herbs (I used sage, basil and thyme) and sliced scallions. Thin with chicken stock. Taste should be gingery sweet and spicy, if not sweet enough add more honey or if too potent from the teriyaki, thin with chicken stock.

Marinating time depends on the thickness of the meat—thin steaks like flank steak should only be in the marinade for half an hour, London broil an hour or so, turning often.

“I’m like a race horse wanting to get out of the paddock,” says Ruffin, asking if she can at least take the sponge cake out of its pan. “We call this the AARP cake,” she says, “because it doesn’t have any fat in it.”

The lady with the camera arrives after a visit from AAA to fix a flat tire, and Ruffin flies into action cutting up cauliflower, which will be turned into a gratin with homemade béchamel. (“It looks great with that red dish,” says Darcy, a designer.) On the counter is a plate with Mecox Farm Atlantic Mist cheese and the first of the local apples. The eggs for the cake came from Ty Llwyd on the North Fork and the green beans from Densieski Farm Stand in





East Quogue, which is celebrating its 94th year in business. “They have the best green beans,” Ruffin says, remembering when the matriarch ran the stand and the beans were all arranged facing the same direction.

Detail. Much like Ruffin’s watercolors, close examinations of flowers and leaves and fruit. The paintings, she says, “remind me of the beauty of little everyday things.”

The steak, from Village Prime Meat Shoppe in East Quogue, which everyone calls Sonny’s, goes into a marinade made with honey from the North Fork. The honey, Blossom Meadow, is the produce of beekeeper Lauren Klahre, who rents the house where Ruffin’s father used to live. It was made by bees gathering nectar on her father’s property. A splash of bourbon finishes it.

All the wine came from Wölffer Estate, as winemaker Roman Roth is a friend and was the chairman of the Merliance HARVEST fund-raiser, of which hospice was a beneficiary. She told him the menu and he sent over a bottle of Wölffer’s Basic White Table Wine 2001, a 2005 Grapes of Roth Merlot and a bottle of La Diosa dessert wine. Ruffin, not a big drinker, had a little taste.

The crowd oohs and ahhs as the gratin comes out of the oven and as John Barnes brings the steak in from the grill. One sister points out that Ruffin has forgotten the place cards, which is a project the three are working on, producing notepads and cards decorated with artwork by all three of them. The AARP cake is topped with cooked peaches from Davis Peach Farm and ice cream from Snowflake in Riverhead.

After dinner the sisters gather in the galley kitchen, which has been decorated with sunflowers, while Ruffin’s dogs, Glory and Hazel, sister chocolate poodles, surround their feet and tease each other.

“This old meal,” says Ruffin. “I just put it together.” 🍷

### PRISCILLA RUFFIN’S EARLY-FALL DINNER MENU

- Olives, Mecox Bay Dairy Atlantic Mist cheese with lovely (first crop) local crisp green apples.
- Followed by flank steak marinated in my own marinade made with fresh herbs from my garden, scallions, grated ginger, dry mustard, local honey, soy sauce and a shot of bourbon.
- Veggies—cauliflower au gratin and steamed haricots verts—both from Densieski Farm Stand on Lewis Road—my favorite.
- Sullivan Street bread if I can get it from Sonny’s.
- Ending with my homemade sponge cake (made with eggs from Ty Llwyd) topped with locally made vanilla ice cream and peaches from Davis Peach Farm that I will slice and poach in sweet ginger syrup.