What can $3 buy you?
A homemade meal and a talk hosted by Williams College's Center for Environmental Studies

Every week since 1972, Williams students have cooked Log Lunches.
But they weren't always this ambitious

- By Aaron Simon Gross, The Berkshire Eagle  Nov 15, 2023

Williams College senior Catherine Rame fills dumpling dough with fresh veggies.
GILLIAN JONES-HECK — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

WILLIAMSTOWN — Outside The Log, a line forms down Spring Street, 100 people and counting. Williams College students mingle with their parents. Professors chat with their neighbors and others who are unaffiliated with the college.
In The Log's back kitchen, a dozen Williams students form an assembly line. A few are rolling out gyoza dumpling dough, some are filling flattened dough-wheels with a gingery slaw. Across the room, others are poking still-hot butter mochi, gauging its springiness. A table over, two stir braised daikon.

Every Friday since 1972, Williams students have cooked lunch at The Log, creating dishes to accompany talks hosted by the college’s Center of Environmental Studies. These lunches are open to anyone, whether they're involved with the college or not. And though the official line is that these $3 meals consist of “soup, salad and homemade bread,” that’s not exactly true.

Each week, program co-directors Riku Nakano and Ainslee Ogletree, both juniors, devise wildly disparate, thoughtfully crafted menus, along with their leadership team. What’s more, they all make every last piece of the meal from scratch.

Recent meals have included a pumpkin squash curry with Lebanese cabbage slaw and garlic naan, which came about when Chenai's Farm Stand in Williamstown had excess butternut squash. Then there was the African chickpea stew with jollof rice, which was led by Josh Bruns, a student on the leadership team originally from Dakar.

“Sorry, today’s a crazy day,” Ogletree said, stirring miso into broth before ladling kombu and wakame into a vat of the soup. “The dumplings, especially, are really ambitious.”

Ogletree and Nakano take care of everything on the business side of the operation, from coordinating with farms to being in touch with Log management to overseeing their 30-student staff to sorting out finances.

"Log Lunches are big into seasonal ingredients," said Williams College junior Riku Nakano, co-director of the student led program. Nakano, right, watches as fellow student Genevieve Randazzo, left, tastes the soup.
They operate from an ingredients budget of $300 to $400 a week. Students apply like they would for any other job; some have professional cooking experience, most don’t. They’re paid Massachusetts minimum wage, $15 an hour. (The co-directors make a few quarters more.) Many hope to have careers in food, sustainability or both after graduating.

While squeezing around each other in the tight Log kitchen, the student chefs talk about their Halloween and Spring Fling parties as well as meals they’ve devised at home, like a beet gnocchi. Their shifts are scheduled around classes and extracurricular activities, so they’re not always here with the same people. As they work on, some snack on pumpkin seeds that Nakano has baked, saved from last week’s squash: half are savory and spicy, half are sweet and caramelized.

There’s always a lot of problem-solving, like in any kitchen. One cook says "You're a genius" to her friend when she finds a solution for over-salted daikon.

The directors and leadership team don’t have time to plan in advance, as they're constantly jumping from meal to meal.

“Every weekend, we meet to think of the menu for the coming Friday,” Nakano said. “It’s very week by week.”

They're always a little nervous that something will go horribly wrong. But, they say, it tends to go off without a hitch.

The week’s work begins when Nakano contacts local farms to ask what veggies are available.

“We build menus off the question of what we can use,” she said. If something’s available in excess, even better.

This week, Bigfoot Farm in Williamstown had a lot of purple daikon radishes.
“Coming from a Japanese family, I love braised daikon when it gets cold so that immediately got me thinking,” Nakano said. She and Ogletree knew that the Environmental Center’s garden had chives right now which could go in gyoza, Japanese wontons.

Through working at 328 North Farm in Williamstown, Nakano knew its owner, Tu Le, had ginger, which could easily unite the gyoza and daikon, so she brought the idea to Ogletree and their leadership team.

From there, the group brainstorms, spitting ideas out with a “yes, and — ” mentality.

“It happens really quickly and just sort of comes naturally,” Ogletree said.

This week, they decided they’d make gyoza, both gluten-free and not, filled with ginered veggies that were “a little crunchy fresh zesty,” as Nakano said. They’d braise the purple daikon in a garlicky ginger glaze with sweet potatoes, and they’d pickle extra daikon for garnish. There’d be a miso soup with two types of seaweed — both kombu and wakame — and soft tofu. There’d be an accompaniment of sesame-flecked gingery jasmine rice littered with scallions and edamame. And for dessert, tensile butter mochi and a vegan gluten-free banana bread.

Deep exhale. So much for “soup, salad and handmade bread.” But that tagline is a peek into the program’s history, before students were this ambitious with the food.

When the Environmental Studies Center started Log Lunches over 50 years ago, it was pretty much just a few students seated around a table with speakers.

Faculty members like Lauren R. Stevens, who’s come to Log Lunches since the very beginning, were drawn by the quality of the speakers, ranging from environmental lawyers to sustainability activists.
“I can’t say it was the food back then, I’ll tell you that,” he said, looking at the gyoza. It’s only within the past decade that the food has gotten more interesting, he said. It was around that time that attendees had to register in advance through the Center for Environmental Studies listserv. (Registration is still required, via a link on the college website.)

But while The Log has had many purposes over the years, from Home Tea Room to Alumni Center to temporary dean’s office, it’s always hosted the lunches.

And when Ramunto’s Brick Oven Pizza opened in The Log a few years ago, Log Lunches were a non-negotiable part of the contract.

Since 1972, Williams College students have cooked weekly Friday "Log Lunches" that accompany a lecture hosted by the college’s Center for Environmental Studies. The $3 lunches are open to the public.
Williams College senior Catherine Rame fills dumpling dough with fresh veggies.

Williams sophomore Hannah Bernhardt rolls the dumpling dough while senior Catherine Rame, at left, fills it. Log Lunches were kept up all through the pandemic, with reduced capacity and open windows.

"Log Lunches are big into seasonal ingredients," said Williams College junior Riku Nakano, co-director of the student led program. Nakano, right, watches as fellow student Genevieve Randazzo, left, tastes the soup.

Williams students fill their plates in buffet style for a lunch made by fellow students at The Log, on Spring Street in Williamstown.

“All these students, faculty, local community members all having this home—cooked lunch that a team of students made was just a really unique space," said director Riku Nakano.
“We cook to serve over 100 people every week, that was the thing that surprised me,” director Ainslee Ogletree said.

Every Friday since 1972, Williams students host lunches for the Williamstown community at The Log, cooking meals with ingredients from local farms, with a local speaker to talk about environmental-related topics.

Nowadays, talks range from environmental solution schemes to indigenous farming technology with guests from Paul Mark to local farmer Tu Le. On this particular Friday, the talk is by Grace Weatherall, a 2016 Williams graduate who works as an attorney with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Williams professor Sarah Gardner, who has managed the school’s Center for Environmental Studies since 2002, sets up the speakers. As the students put the finishing touches on the Japanese-inspired meal, she pops her heads into the kitchen.

“How’s it going today, everything going well?” she asks, greeted by a couple of nods and affirmative grunts.

“They don’t need my help,” she says. “They’re busy, they’re working.”

It’s 10 minutes to go time as some start carrying pots of food to the front lobby. At noon on the dot, they open the door.

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