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How to ‘eat locally’ in winter

As the season changes, take care where your food comes from — and consider buying frozen — for a healthy, mostly local diet

By Nancy Reardon Stewart | Globe Correspondent | November 21, 2011

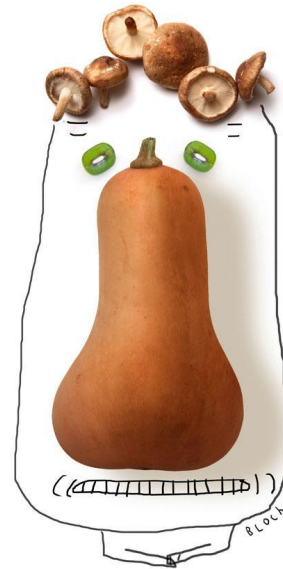
It’s the ultimate “eat-local” holiday. The classic Thanksgiving is a tribute to the New England harvest, from the cranberries and corn, to the apples in the pie, and the meal’s traditional assortment of orange vegetables, including squash, turnips, and sweet potatoes.

On Thursday, many of us will fill our plates, loosen our belts, and attack our food as if eating our last great meal for months. Of course, we face no such deprivation. Unlike the Pilgrims of nearly 400 years ago, we have a perpetual summer in supermarket produce aisles, with seasonal items such as strawberries and green peppers available year-round. And that type of endless choice, according to nutritionists, can create problems for consumers, especially for those who want to choose locally grown foods whenever possible.

There are only five truly seasonal types of produce in Massachusetts from January until May according to the state Department of Agriculture: apples, shiitake mushrooms, potatoes, sprouts, and mung beans. (That’s not counting produce grown in greenhouses and cold frames.) Some subscribers of strict seasonal eating claim sticking to such foods is the way humans were suited to live, and they attribute much of today’s obesity crisis to the abundance of non-local foods year-round. They believe we crave a naturally low-fat diet of fruits and salads in summer when we are more active and produce is plentiful; stews thick with root vegetables appeal during winter not only because they are available locally, but also because our bodies are programmed to want starch-heavy foods.

But while eating on such a strict regimen may have worked for our ancestors, it doesn’t fit most of modern society, nutritionists caution. Some people barely exercise at all, even in the summer, and an extra layer of fat is no longer needed to stay warm in the winter, said Kate Scarlata, a registered dietician with offices in Boston and Medway. “Most people in New England do hunker down, but people train for marathons in winter,” she said. “We’re not cold. We go from a warm car to a warm house.”

Still, nutrition experts say the healthiest diet uses the seasons as its buying guide. That’s because a seasonal diet that changes all year provides a wide variety of vitamins and minerals. But that’s no reason to wear blinders in the supermarket. When tempted by nonseasonal fruits and vegetables, experts say the key to getting the most nutrition out of them is to pay attention to where they come from - and take advantage of frozen options. “Is it OK to have strawberries in the dead of winter? Well, where are they from?” said Scarlata. “In winter, the frozen peppers are probably going to be more nutritious than the one that’s been traveling and probably had all the nutrients degraded out of it,” she said. You have to consider personal motivation, too. “In February, it can be nice to taste the fruits of summer to remind you of what is coming. The Pilgrims might have done so if they had refrigeration,” said Jeanne Goldberg, a professor at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University.



Encouraging people to eat more fruits and vegetables is the first priority, followed by a lesson in seasonal shopping, said Debra Wein, a registered dietician and cofounder of Sensible Nutrition and Wellness Workdays, consulting firms that specialize in individual and corporate wellness, respectively. “I hear people say, ‘I don’t eat vegetables.’ Or, ‘I only eat two, and they are carrots and lettuce,’ ” Wein said. That’s why frozen options, and the occasional winter purchase of, say, berries can be helpful. Otherwise, some people would not satisfy the recommended daily five servings each of fruits and vegetables, she said.

Nutritionists are not the only ones trying to expand our culinary imaginations year-round. More and more local farmers are adapting their operations to cater to demand for winter products. A few years ago, the state had only one or two wintertime farmers’ markets, said Rick LeBlanc, spokesman for the state’s Department of Agriculture. Last winter, that number hit more than 20, and so far, 30 are planned for this winter. “There’s so much more public awareness about food in general and eating more healthy and organic,” LeBlanc said.

Ryan Voiland, owner of Redfire Farm in Granby offers a “deep winter” community supported agriculture program, or CSA, which allows consumers to sign up for a

biweekly share of produce from January to March. “What I’m seeing is that the interest during the regular growing season is starting to manifest itself in the winter as well,” Voiland said. In recent years, he has offered 300 shares and sold out. He added 50 more this year. Voiland’s farm sells only Massachusetts-grown items and avoids foods that are impossible to grow in the local climate. He uses unheated greenhouses called high tunnels to grow salad mix, baby lettuces, and Asian greens, and has invested heavily in cold storage facilities to store root vegetables and apples. He invested \$200,000 this season in a new climate-controlled storage facility to keep up with demand. “For me, personally, when it’s tomato season, I gorge on tomatoes, but when it’s winter, that doesn’t work out too well. In the winter you want more roots,” Voiland said. “That’s something a lot of people have got away from with our supermarket-ese. Everyone is just eating the same old vegetables all year round.”

Some farmers partner with their counterparts farther down the East Coast to offer fresh produce that, while not seasonal to Massachusetts, should still be considered local, they argue. “Our whole concept is, if you live in San Diego, you could buy ‘local’ produce all the way to the Oregon border, but we live in provincial New England,” said David Jackson, owner of Enterprise Farm in Whately. His winter CSA includes items such as oranges, lemons, and limes from Florida. Three years ago, Jackson’s winter farm share program served 70 people. Last year, that figure skyrocketed to 900.

“The whole issue of seasonal eating is based on whether you are convinced it has to be bought within a 100-mile radius versus something bought fresh off the farm you can get four days later from Florida,” Jackson said. He pointed to the beloved Thanksgiving creamy-crunchy side dish green beans almondine. Most green beans, he said, come from Florida or Georgia, and they can’t be grown locally.

“They became popular at Thanksgiving because they could ship well,” he said.

