The Ontario Trillium Foundation
La Fondation Trillium de l'Ontario

Foodlink Waterloo Region

Eating Local in Winter

LocalHarvest

Foodlink Waterloo Region • Issue 49 • Winter 2012

Features

Eating Local Throughout the Winter

Local Business Profile: Jay West

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Eating Local Throughout the Winter

While it is not always easy to eat local throughout the winter months, it can certainly be done and is well worth the effort. It makes sense to consume locally grown food as much as possible, from many different perspectives. It is better for the environment, better for our local farming economy and better for our health. Our ancestors survived with only local produce all year, before we started importing food from all over the world. Today, many traditional skills such as canning, preserving and freezing are coming back into vogue. By investing some time and energy into such endeavors, we are able take advantage of local produce when it is most abundant, least expensive and at the peak of its flavor.

A 365-Locavore

One of the simplest and most obvious ways to be a year-round locavore is to consider the numerous "season-less" foods that can be sourced from local farmers all year long. These foods include dairy products, meats, grains and several root veggies. Why not take advantage of the Buy Local farms and markets that are open year round? You might be surprised to learn how many fruits and vegetables can be grown and stored late in the year! Ask your grocery store manager what products they carry from local farmers and voice your concern if they fall short of the mark.

Here are a few ways to preserve the harvest for the colder months:

Freezing

Freezing produce is probably one of the quickest and easiest methods of preserving and a great way to enjoy summer fruits and veggies. Freezing slows enzyme activity that causes food to deteriorate. Things like green beans—and even the divine and funky little fiddlehead—are best frozen, suggests Rose Murray, Cambridge, Ontario-based broadcaster and author of A Taste of Canada: A Culinary Journey. "Blanch them to stop the enzymes that will continue to make them deteriorate. Drain them, cool them, dry them off, and pack them in plastic bags and freeze. When you take them out it's just a question of steaming them for a couple of minutes."

Berries and peaches are extra special treats in the middle of February. How about dipping into the freezer for rhubarb pieces or shredded zucchini for a mid-winter baking session?

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Local Farm Profile continued

Canning

Though it takes the most skill, canning is a preservation method that has enjoyed a real renaissance in recent years. Bernardin, a major Canadian manufacturer of canning equipment, has noted increases of over 20 per cent in sales in the last couple of years. Canning preserves food without desiccation, the sour flavours of pickling, or the sweetness of sugar. The foodstuff is cooked in hermetically sealed jars to kill bacteria, molds, and enzymes which can then be stored in a cool, dark place for a year or longer depending on the food item. While canned food loses some nutritional value, if it is processed at its peak of flavour it can still be more nutritious than some fresh foods that have been transported great distances and over longer periods of time. Canning also offers the convenience of preserved food such as beets, relishes and orchard fruits that are ready to use, requiring neither thawing nor cooking.

Dehydrating

Dehydrating other fruits and vegetables is an excellent way to preserve nutrients in food for the winter months. Drying or dehydrating food simply removes most of the item's moisture requiring little processing energy and taking up little space for storage. There are electric dehydrators or simpler drying methods that use kitchen ovens or even the sun. Dehydrated foods are perfect for travelling or outdoor activities such as backpacking or canoe tripping. So next time you have a bumper crop of apples or tomatoes give it a try. Dried beans are a great staple in winter meals and the more adventurous might even want to try dehydrating meat.

Pickling/Fermenting

This method of preserving is also known as "brining" or "corning". It is the process of preserving food by anaerobic fermentation in a brine (a solution of salt in water) to produce lactic acid and then storing it in an acid solution (usually vinegar). This procedure produces a food with a salty or sour taste. Another distinguishing characteristic is a pH of less than 4.6, which is sufficient to kill most bacteria. Pickling can preserve perishable foods for months. Antimicrobial herbs and spices, such as mustard seed, garlic, cinnamon or cloves, are often added. If the food contains sufficient moisture, a pickling brine may be produced simply by adding dry salt. For example, sauerkraut, very popular here in Waterloo Region, and Korean kimchi are produced by salting the vegetables to draw out excess water. Natural fermentation at room temperature, by lactic acid, produces the required acidity. Other pickles are made by placing vegetables in vinegar. Unlike the canning process, pickling (which includes fermentation) does not require that the food be completely sterile before it is sealed.

Treasures Down Under: The Root Cellar

Another less complicated method uses for storing food is the root cellar. A cooler insulated room in the basement works well for all root vegetables and winter squash, as well as smoked meats, cheese, wine, beer and nuts. A good root cellar has a variety of shelves and certain root crops can be stored in boxes of loose soil or sawdust, which serves to further insulate and preserve them.

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Greenhouses: Extending the Growing Season

There are a number of techniques used to accomplish season extension, a way of growing produce beyond the normal growing season. Perhaps the most familiar technology is the greenhouse, an enclosed building made of glass or plastic, which utilizes solar radiation for heat. Greenhouses can also be artificially lit and heated (increasingly, by using green energy sources like compost or "passive solar" processes that store heat for use later), allowing farmers to grow crops year-round! In Waterloo Region a variety of greenhouse products including tomatoes, cucumbers, beans and salad greens can be found. This enables us to eat delicious local product as early as March or April. Cold frames are similar to greenhouses in concept, but can be less costly or complicated to build and maintain. They are frequently used for seedlings that are later transplanted into the ground, helping to "kick-start" the season. Other cold weather solutions come in the form of row covers—light fabric or plastic covers placed over plants to retain heat and protect against frost. Mulches of various kinds can be used by farmers, or on the homefront, to keep crops and soil warm. Finally, raised beds, which build up soil a few inches or even a foot above the surrounding ground, offer additional tools for season extension. The soil in raised beds will heat up more quickly and can allow earlier spring planting.

It's Not Too Late to Eat Local this Winter!

Let's say you didn't take the time to freeze, preserve or dehydrate during the harvest. Don't despair, there are other convenient ways to eat local during the winter months. Consider joining a local buying club or CSA that operates year round. **Bailey's Local Food** is an on-line ordering service featuring a comprehensive product line with two convenient pick-up locations in Waterloo and Breslau. There are also many great on-farm markets that offer one-stop shopping featuring a wide array of local products, including frozen, preserved and fresh baked goods! In addition, keep an eye open for great local greenhouse product available in the early spring.

Supporting local farmers throughout the winter months and channeling just a little bit more money to them, can go a long way in keeping our farmland viable. It results in a win-win situation keeping farmers in strong financial shape during the slow season while allowing you to enjoy the freshest, healthiest food available! ◆

Local Business Profile: Jay West – Rooted in the Farm Community

Have you ever wondered about the people who work in "the middle" of our food supply chain? What happens once that fresh food leaves the farm? Unlike widgets, fresh food is perishable, so the movement of this precious cargo is a delicate business. It's referred to as the "middle" of our food distribution system and much of it happens behind the scenes. Luckily, we have food produce professionals who make it their business to navigate through the journey as it leaves the field and before it reaches our fork. Without them, we could not enjoy such a wealth of local food even through the winter months.

The growing demand for fresh local food has increased the need for an effective food distribution network in our region. Experienced food facilitators like Nelson Wideman and Jesse Gingrich responded in 2010 by opening a wholesale produce company called Jay West in St. Jacobs. Jay West provides personal service and custom orders to buyers. They operate a convenient assembly warehouse that brings in produce and flowers from 30-40 small, neighbouring farms. Complimenting the offerings available at the nearby Elmira produce auction (EPAC), they are open year round, selling the freshest, seasonal produce ranging from single boxes and flats up to multiple skids.

In a typical year it is not unusual for six or seven tractor loads of cabbage to pass through the Jay West warehouse doors. In addition, tons of potatoes, squash, cucumbers as well as other produce are sorted, packed and graded before they head to an intermediary warehouse, eventually arriving in supermarkets across the province. Increasing these channels serve to broaden the markets for local food and help to stabilize prices. A vibrant supply chain provides a good return for our farmers and boosts our rural economy.

"Trust and reliability are the foundation on which we have built our business", says Nelson. He and his partner Jesse are pleased to be able to work with local farms to keep local food flowing into grocery stores, restaurants and local food businesses across the region. Quality control is key at Jay West. Consistent high quality products keep their buyers happy and coming back for more.

Playing a coordinating role between the farms and buyers is an important customized service that Nelson and Jesse provide. Advance planning and coordination saves valuable time. Knowing what the buyer wants, allows Jay West to customize orders, working with each farm in advance to confirm the pack sizes and specs. Jesse points out that they try to avoid time wasted re-packing, especially because extra handling can spoil or bruise the delicate produce. After all of the careful nurturing and harvesting, to destroy such pristine bounty would be a shame!

Grocery stores have many specifications and by having Jay West worry about those details, it frees up these farmers to put their energies into farming. They also keep track of market prices to ensure farmers get a fair price for their products. To accommodate big buyer specifications, especially around stringent food safety, plans are underway to provide a third party audit of the warehouse, using a government inspector. Produce is monitored every step of the way, from crop management in the field to the final arrival at the customer's doorstep. Jay West ensures the utmost of care as the delicate produce is washed, graded, packed, moved into temperature controlled storage, loaded and then shipped.

Buyers are reassured that formalized checks and balances are in place. The inspections ensure that the chemical, pesticide and manure applications are noted and that the harvest interval is honoured. Even equipment sanitizing is tracked.

Stores buying from Jay West know they can rely on their quality produce and flowers. Consumers can find their fresh, crunchy cabbage throughout these winter months at outlets such as the **Elmira No Frills** grocery store.

We're so fortunate to have fresh, local food at our fingertips. Besides " thanking a farmer today", we should also thank food facilitators like Jay West, who navigate the food system on behalf of small farmers, moving local food from the field to our forks.

Jay West is located at 51 Hawkesville Road, St. Jacobs. Contact Nelson Wideman 519-699-9350 or Jesse Gingrich 519-664-3501. ◆

More Tips for Eating Local in Winter

- Winter is a good time to develop your baking skills. You can enjoy delicious breads, cakes and muffins while heating your home
- Try growing your own sprouts. Commercial sprouters are available in health food stores or you can make your own with mason jars.
- You can always grow smaller things in your own kitchen such as herbs. Your food will taste fresher and you'll save money.
- Winter is a good time to buy locally or regionally produced pantry item like dried beans, grains and pasta.
- Take advantage of our numerous winter farm markets and local retail shops that offer meats, cheeses, root veggies, preserves, frozen and greenhouse products.

Braised Beef With Paprika and Root Vegetables

This dish makes the most of winter root veggies and less expensive cuts of beef slow cooked in liquid. This easy recipe combines the kick of paprika with rich, savoury red wine (like boeuf bourguignon, or French beef stew). Serve it with mashed potatoes, pureed celery root, over egg noodles or with a loaf of crusty bread. Feel free to play around with the root vegetables you use. Potatoes, for example, would be a delicious addition, as would sweet potatoes or carrots.

Prep Time: 1 hour
Cook Time: 2 hours

What you will need:

1 beef round or other braising roast (2 1/2 to 3 lbs.)
2 Tbsp. vegetable oil
1 oz. dried mushrooms
1 onion, chopped
1/2 tsp. salt plus more to taste
3 cloves garlic, chopped
1 Tbsp. hot paprika
1 cup red wine
1 cup water
2 parsnips, trimmed and cut into bite-size pieces
2 rutabagas, peeled and cut into bite-size pieces
2 turnips, peeled and cut into bite-size pieces
Green onion or green garlic for garnish (optional)

Method:

1. Trim and tie roast, if necessary. In a large heavy pot (with a lid) over medium high heat warm oil. Brown roast. Place roast in pan and let sizzle and brown until meat releases from pan, 3 to 5 minutes. Turn and brown on another side. This will take a total of 15 to 20 minutes to get all sides well browned. Do not skimp on this step, since the browning adds an incredible depth of flavor to the final dish. When well browned, transfer roast to a plate or platter.
2. Meanwhile, put dried mushrooms in a medium bowl and pour 1 cup boiling water over them. Let steep at least 20 minutes.
3. Preheat oven to 350°F. Drain off all but about 1 tsp. or less of the oil, being careful to reserve all browned bits in the pan. Add onion and 1/2 tsp. salt and cook, stirring and scraping up browned bits on the pan until onion is soft, about 3 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add paprika and cook, stirring, until the raw smell cooks off, about 1 minute. Add wine and water, scrape up any bits clinging to the pot and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer 10 minutes.
4. Meanwhile, lift mushrooms out of soaking liquid and chop finely. Discard soaking liquid. Add chopped mushrooms and beef to the pot.
5. Cover and bake for 1 hour. Taste braising liquid and add salt to taste. Add root vegetables to pot. Continue to bake until it is tender when pierced with a fork, about 30 minutes.
6. Transfer beef to a plate or platter and let rest. Bring liquid and vegetables to a boil and cook, uncovered, until vegetables are tender liquid thickens slightly, about 10 minutes.
7. Slice beef and serve with liquid and vegetables. Top with a sprinkle of chopped green onion or green garlic, if desired.

Makes 6 servings