



Eat Local ALL YEAR

Alaska provides bounty of options

By SUSAN SOMMER

“How much per pound?” my husband said as we sat down to our expertly grilled chops cut from Alaska-raised pork. He looked as if he might choke even before starting the meal.

I grinned and shrugged. “Well, four hunters in the family, and no moose meat in the freezer this year ... just trying to support the locals.”

After dinner, he agreed it was the best pork chop he'd tasted in recent memory. I thought so, too. Still, I felt a twinge of guilt at having spent much more than I would have on sale at the grocery store. In all my years as an Alaskan, I can't remember a winter without moose meat, so buying pork chops at the farmers market was a first for me.

Whether you already include local foods in your diet by choice or necessity, or you don't know a locavore from a locomotive, one thing's for sure: Alaska's edible resources

are fast becoming a topic of conversation at dinner parties, potlucks, restaurant tables and school lunchrooms. And as always, they're an essential part of the feast for rural residents and remote cabin dwellers.

“Abundance” is usually not the first word most people think of when they envision Alaska-sourced foods. After all, it's cold and dark here, right? Well, only half the year. During the other half, plants and animals spring to life and grow fast under the midnight sun. But even during the darkest, coldest days of December, if you've planned well and if you keep your finger on the pulse of the local food community, it's possible not only to exist but to thrive on nonimported fare.

Charles Bingham of the Sitka Local Foods Network says he eats “salmon, halibut, rockfish, sablefish (black cod), venison, moose, garden veggies, seaweed, berries, etc.” He also points out that “Alaska will never be one hundred percent local, but we need to work on bringing the proportion of imported food down significantly to have a sustainable food system.”

The term “locavore” has been bandied about so much lately you might think eating local foods is a new trend. But for as far back as memory stretches, people have been eating only what was available in a certain geographic region, in a specific season, and in accordance with hunting and gathering skills. Only since modern technology allowed commercial farms and factories to join the voracious fray have we strayed from the habit of local diets.

Most of Alaska's rural residents eat local foods—caribou, seal, berries, fiddlehead ferns and a bounty of other edibles. In the smaller, more remote communities

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ALASKA MAGAZINE/SERINE HALVERSON; ALASKA MAGAZINE/SERINE HALVERSON; ALASKA MAGAZINE/SERINE HALVERSON; ALASKA MAGAZINE/MICHAEL DINNEEN



[LEFT TO RIGHT] **Kelsey Cloud** works on some carrots for Arctic Organics. **Randy and Cathy Steen**, along with their dog, Harley, pose in their vegetable garden in Chugiak.



especially, the lack of grocery items for sale and the high cost of what is sold make hunting, fishing and foraging the only other options.

The average grocery bill in 2010 for a family of four in Nome was more than \$230 per week, compared to about \$130 for the same size family in Anchorage.

Alaskans also site ethical reasons for eating local. Deirdre Helfferich of Ester (near Fairbanks) says, "I don't want the social/political control over my life by others that buying from megacorporate producers results in. Also, I am VERY interested in preserving biodiversity and the health of the land—something that small, local farmers excel at."

Rural dwellers aren't the only ones eating local, however. Urban Alaskans shop at farmers markets, forage near and far and take their best shot at hunting and fishing. Vegetable gardens dot the landscape from coast to Interior.

Sure, it's pretty easy to catch a few salmon or pick enough berries for a pie. And some items can be purchased year-round via brick and mortar or online retailers. But how can the average Alaskan—whether city slicker or rustic retiree—eat local all year?

Here are some tips to help add more local eats to your diet:

HUNTING & FISHING

The Alaska Department of Fish & Game should be your first stop to learn about hunting and fishing regulations, seasons, licensing, firearm and boating safety, meat care and more. Fish & Game also offers classes in hunter education and supply details on fish-run timing, species identification, proxy fishing or hunting and shooting ranges.

There's nothing like that first bite of the season's fresh moose backstrap or smoky grilled salmon fillet. For variety in your Alaska food diet, try hunting for ptarmigan, snowshoe hare, caribou or deer. And with luck you might find grayling, trout, salmon or halibut on the end of your line. Dig clams or set out shrimp pots. Share or barter meat with family and friends; check regulations before trading. There's no shortage of healthy, wild, animal protein sources in Alaska.

FORAGING

Edible wild plants grow in every region of the state: on hillsides, under the forest canopy, atop the tundra and at shoreline.

They are free for the taking on public lands, and many pack a nutritional punch. For example, sea lettuce, a common algae found in the intertidal zone, is high in iron. A quick glance through a good reference book reveals the variety and abundance: blueberries, currants, dock, fireweed, Indian potato, kelp, mushrooms, nettles, spruce tips and wild chives. Before eating any wild plants, positive identification is a must, as there are some poisonous look-alikes. Allergies can also be an issue; try new plants in small doses.

Urban foraging is an option, too. The notorious dandelion is only a weed if you don't eat it. Otherwise, it's a versatile food. Toss dandelion leaves (high in vitamins A, B and C and several minerals) into stir fries, soups or salads; roll the flowers (high in vitamin D) in flour and fry in butter; dig the roots, then dry, grind and brew them for a no-caffeine drink that looks and tastes just like coffee. Chickweed, another "weed" oft maligned by gardeners, has a lot of vitamin C. Crabapple trees are common in Alaska's towns; ask the owner for permission before harvesting the fruit. Also, make sure when picking urban edibles that they've neither been sprayed with weed killer nor had other poisonous chemicals applied.

LEFT TO RIGHT: ALASKA MAGAZINE/SERINE HALVERSON; ALASKA MAGAZINE/MICHAEL DINNEEN



GARDENING

Vegetable gardening can be as simple as growing a few pots of greens on your apartment balcony or as lush as a large backyard plot with a dozen or more species and varieties engineered specifically for short northern growing seasons. Either method yields fresh produce for several weeks, and larger gardens provide enough to process for later use. Growing something of your own reduces the grocery bill and supports food security in a state that relies almost solely on a single point of entry for provisions. Lettuce, spinach, kale, radishes and raspberries are an easy bet for beginners. Alaska gardeners with more experience are growing broccoli, cabbage, onions, potatoes, carrots, squashes, beans and beets, as well as greenhouse crops such as tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and eggplant.

BUYING LOCAL FOODS

Farmers markets around Alaska commence in May or June and continue through the fall harvest. From Bethel in the west to Delta Junction in the Interior to Sitka in Southeast, vendors appear weekly with their locally grown fresh produce. Other fare graces these booths, too,

such as honey, herbs, eggs, cheese, chicken, yak, beef and homemade jams and jellies.

Other options include grocery stores and restaurants; many advertise local specials. If you can't find what you're looking for, ask the manager or server. If demand increases enough, supply will follow. Or visit a u-pick farm. These operations open their fields to pickers who stroll up and down the rows filling bags with as much as they want of whichever crops are ready at the time, and then pay per pound. U-picks are also a good way to get kids involved and excited about eating their veggies!

Even in winter, Alaska's entrepreneurs work to provide high-quality Alaska-sourced foods for sale. For example, Home-Grown Market in Fairbanks carries Alaska meats, dairy, long-storing vegetables and microgreens (small greens and herbs). Other meat, seafood and fowl sources include Delta Meat & Sausage Co. in Delta Junction, 10th & M Seafoods in Anchorage and All I Saw Farm in Wasilla. Sun Circle Farm in Palmer offers pig shares, in which the consumer prepays for the farm's naturally raised, GMO-free pork. In Bethel, Western Alaska's hub community, Meyers Farm sells root vegetables and eggs all year. Anchorage's Center Market moves indoors once fall arrives, and even past the beginning of the year it's typical to find carrots, potatoes, squash, cabbage, chicken and duck eggs, milk, cheese and a variety of meats available for purchase. Alaska Flour Company of Delta Junction opened in 2011 and sells its products statewide. Several beekeepers sell their honey via websites year-round, and it can also be found in some stores. The same goes for seafood, wine using Alaska berries and even salt derived from pure Gulf of Alaska seawater.

PRESERVING METHODS

Preserving local foods by freezing, canning, drying, smoking or fermenting lets you enjoy the flavors all year long. Investing in a high-quality vacuum sealer is a good idea if you plan to freeze a lot of food, especially fish or meat. The Cooperative Extension Service is the place to go for information on canning, dehydrating and pickling food. And any cool location will work for storing potatoes, carrots and cabbage.

HABITS

Change isn't easy. Becoming a year-round locavore in Alaska won't happen over-

Learn About Alaska Foods

By Susan Sommer

Visit these websites to find information, discussions, events and more related to eating local in Alaska.

Alaska Community Agriculture:
alaskacommunityag.org

Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game:
adfg.alaska.gov

Alaska Farmers Market Association:
alaskafarmersmarkets.org

Eat Localaska: akfood.weebly.com

Alaska Food Policy Council blog:
alaskafoodpolicy.blogspot.com

Alaska Permaculture:
akpermaculture.ning.com

Alaska Pioneer Fruit Growers Association: apfga.org

Cooperative Extension Service:
uaf.edu/ces

Sitka Local Foods Network:
sitkalocalfoodsnetwork.org

Southcentral Alaska Beekeepers Association: alaskabees.com

State Division of Agriculture:
dnr.alaska.gov/ag/index.htm

Sustainable Homer:
sustainablehomer.org/Food.htm

night. Cooking from scratch, if you don't already, takes time and effort to learn. And those cravings for non-Alaska foods—the tropical tang of mango, the sweet creaminess of chocolate—don't just suddenly disappear.

The good news is that you don't have to be 100 percent locavore. You can still have your triple-shot latté (ask for local milk) and your guacamole (dip chips made from Alaska-grown potatoes), while adding as many of Alaska's edibles to your plate as possible. The more you practice, the more the Alaska foods take over your plate, and you'll be eating a healthy feast from our vast northern backyard. 🍴

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