

Introduction

This book compiles recipes from eight years of my *North Country Kitchen* column. I've tried to make the column local and seasonal; this book is all of that, and more.

An entire generation has grown up on restaurant fare and commercially prepared TV dinners. Professionals and corporations—the “food industry”—have, to a great extent, come to control what we eat. In the 21st century, most people are not aware of how their food is grown, who grew it, or where it is produced. Many have ceased to care. We eat in restaurants and buy prepackaged instant dinners or ready-to-eat convenience products: meat that is precooked and salad that is pre-washed. We have become accustomed to products that are always available, affordable, convenient, and instantly gratifying.

Every day I meet folks who claim they don't know how to cook. An entire generation no longer cooks unless they can open a box. A woman visiting from another country told me, “There is no food here. Only boxes.”

Boxes offer pre-measured convenience at the cost of creativity and adaptability. A muffin mix is as is. A muffin recipe can be changed. You can add more sugar, use less, or sweeten with honey or maple syrup instead. You can alter the flours, adding whole wheat, soy, or oats. You can substitute a different fruit, use less or more of a spice or seasoning. You can bake it in a bread pan as a loaf rather than a bunch of muffins.

Boxes have largely replaced treasured family recipes that were once a family legacy, handed down from grandmother to daughter to granddaughter. What will happen to all the old recipes?

The media, with televised cooking shows, has made cooking seem like a difficult art form. People think that good cooking must be hard and time consuming, so we have handed over the art of cooking

to professional chefs whose services we purchase at restaurants.

But cooking does not have to be complicated. There are many simple things to prepare. A salad of freshly picked, vine-ripe tomatoes, accented with a little salt, pepper, parsley, and chives is simple. Add a hard-boiled egg or some freshly grated parmesan or crumbled feta and you have protein. Add a hearty bread and you have a simple but complete meal. There are few things as good as freshly dug, boiled new potatoes tossed with parsley and butter and a little crushed sea salt. Grilled-cheese sandwiches can be made more wholesome by using crusty whole grain bread and adding freshly cut and lightly steamed asparagus spears or a slice of fresh red pepper.

The standard American diet, centered on a main course of meat and potatoes, rice or pasta, lacks imagination as well as nutrition. Even vegetarians tend to plan the meal around meat substitutes like soy sausages or tofurkey. Vegetables and salads have taken a back seat, and we have become a nation that is overfed and undernourished. Instead of eating our vegetables, we take vitamin pills and food supplements. People say they don't like vegetables, but they don't know how to prepare them.

In contrast to meat and starch, many recipes you will find in this book are one-pot meals that incorporate vegetables within the dish, not as a side. They include pan skillet, frittatas, stir-fries, grain pilafs, pasta bowls, salads, stews, or soups. These are simpler, more adaptable, and take less time in the kitchen. These recipes are meant as a guide. Cooking is not a lab experiment; you should feel free to adapt, to add a little more of this or a little less of that.

I have included both meat and vegetarian fare, though many of the meat recipes use meat more as a condiment. If you like more meat, simply increase the amount. Add a salad and perhaps bread or rolls. Follow with a simple dessert of fruit or pastry and a cup of tea or coffee, and dinner is served.

What is “fresh”?

Fresh, seasonal produce is the key to good flavor as well as good health. Generations ago, most food was fresh, except what was stored for winter. Bread was baked fresh at home or down the street by the local baker. Milk came from a farmer a few miles away, and vegetables were either grown in gardens or purchased at farmers' markets. Those fresh ingredients were brought into the kitchen and

turned into delicious food that was eaten at home with the family. My mother always says, “Fresh is best.”

But that has changed. In this era of giant supermarkets, fast food, and restaurants, “fresh” has lost its true meaning. We think the produce we buy in the “fresh” aisle at the supermarket—some of it organic—is fresh and nutritious because it is not frozen or canned.

But this is not true. Most supermarket produce has traveled 1500–2500 miles in refrigerated trucks to reach the consumer. Then it has sat in storage, first in the warehouse, later in the store awaiting purchase. It is far from newly picked. Much of it is harvested unripe, and ripened in transit.

Produce begins to lose moisture, flavor, and nutrients as soon as it is harvested, and nutrient losses multiply each day. Corn, carrots, and peas begin to turn sugars into starches, losing much of their natural sweetness. Once picked, produce begins to lose moisture and nutrients fade away.

Vegetables that have traveled across the continent, even in refrigerated trucks, have already lost much of their dietary value. B-complex, C, and E vitamins are especially sensitive to time, and are missing from produce picked before it has fully ripened. Folic acid is destroyed with time and with light exposure. Some examples: broccoli loses one-third of its vitamin C within two days; green beans lose 58 percent of their original ascorbic acid during the first three days after harvesting; spinach stored at room temperature loses from half to 90 percent of its vitamin C within 24 hours. Even at 40° (the temperature of a refrigerated truck), spinach stored for a week has lost almost half of its nutrient content (47 percent of folic acid, for example). These are all important antioxidants, vital to health, that protect against many diseases, including cancer.

The long journey from California farms to east-coast supermarkets also wastes precious fuel and creates pollution. In contrast, a meal based on local food uses 17 times less fuel for transport. Buying local food conserves resources, is less wasteful, and supports our regional economy.

Good cooks have always known that “fresh is best.” While more expensive and not as convenient, locally grown fruits and veggies are tastier and more wholesome because they’re picked fresh and ripe.

The North Country is a land of cold winters. Our growing

season is short. Yet even here, many people are starting home gardens. Farmers' markets are growing by leaps and bounds, with new ones opening each summer, making fresh produce available to the consumer. Like the town square of earlier times, shopping at the farmers' market is a social activity that connects people with their community. There, the customer has the opportunity to meet and talk with the grower, an exchange that doesn't occur at the supermarket. Farmers are rich sources of tips, recipes, and stories. They can help you discover new foods you were unfamiliar with. And farmers' markets encourage diversity: you can find several varieties of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, or apples.

Cooking by the Seasons

In the past, people eagerly anticipated the arrival of spring with its fresh greens. In fall, we enjoyed the plentiful harvest. In winter, we got by on sweet root crops and cabbages stored in root cellars. Today, we can buy greens in the supermarket that are grown thousands of miles away, washed, sorted, and cut up. We can just open the bag and pour on bottled salad dressing. Neither do we look ahead with anticipation to berries in the summer, fresh tomatoes in August, or apples in October.

The trade-off is that food is not grown for taste or nutrition but for shipping, storage, and appearance. Vegetable varieties that ship well have replaced varieties that taste good. So in the supermarket, we can purchase California strawberries that are tough and white on the inside rather than sweet, juicy, and red all the way through. Oranges are picked green and dyed. Cucumbers are waxed. Tomatoes are depleted of their rich flavor. Brussels sprouts, once prized and imported by Roman chefs, developed a bad reputation because modern varieties that could be harvested by machine also had an unpleasant bitter flavor.

But locally grown, seasonal products are making a comeback. People are realizing that the value of food is in taste and nutrition rather than in convenience or length of storage. Many are willing to pay more for the better nutritional value and richer taste of fresh local products. In a day of tainted peanut butter and pet food laced with rat poison, we want to know where our food comes from: who grew our lettuce and who slaughtered our chickens. It is about community, about the relationship between producer and consumer

that has been lost in our modern agri-business industry. More and more people are cultivating relationships with the farmers who produce their food. Interest in healthy food and concern for the local economy are growing.

Today, many people want to reclaim control of what they put in their bodies. There is a renewed interest in where the food on their plates came from, how it was raised, and who grew it. People want to take care of themselves without buying a can of ready-made soup or a frozen entrée. By picking up fresh ingredients from the farmer's market or growing them in a backyard garden, simple, wholesome, delicious meals can nourish families and friends. This book is for them.

Garden Gourmet: Fresh & Fabulous Meals from your North Country Garden, CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), or Farmers' Market will help you use seasonal produce to prepare wholesome food for your family quickly and without much fuss. Friends and family members can help to shuck fresh corn, hull peas, or chop vegetables. Everyone appreciates good food. Preparing wholesome meals lovingly and graciously is a simple pleasure. An additional bonus: it will fill your home with the delicious scent of good cooking, warmth, and sharing.