

Don't let winter chill fool you; there're still plenty of locally grown produce options



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For The Bellingham Herald

The doldrums of winter might seem like a barren landscape of locally grown produce for some. Not in the Northwest, says personal chef Claire Niland Dunn.

Locally grown kale, Brussels sprouts, leeks, cabbage, apples, beets and winter squash are easy to find and full of nutrients in even the dead of winter.

A scaled-down winter Bellingham Farmers' Market is open the third Saturday of January, February and March.

"A lot of farmers have been experimenting with extending their growing season," says Niland Dunn, owner of the Bellingham-based Cuisine Claire. "Even in January, we're definitely not a produce desert."

Niland Dunn says there are definite ways to eat seasonally, keep up your produce intake and improve your nutrition in the winter without buying produce from half a hemisphere away during the coldest months.

Niland Dunn, who provides homemade meal services featuring local, organic ingredients to clients through her personal chef business, sometimes works with older couples and seniors, as well as young families, who want healthy food year-round.

That means she's always looking for the freshest food she can find in every season.

Niland Dunn suggests a few ways to keep your plate healthy, interesting and full of fresh fruits and vegetables even when the daylight hours are few and the temperatures are low.

Look for cold winter harvests and produce from cold storage.

Niland Dunn says hearty greens like kale often are harvested into the colder months since they can withstand colder evening temperatures. Other produce like winter squash can be stored until needed. The same goes for celeriac, a root vegetable growing in popularity among local organic farmers. Niland Dunn says celeriac can be combined with potatoes in a mash or chopped and added to soups.

Washington apples, which peak in the fall, are kept in special cold storage units, which can keep them nearly as crisp and juicy as the day they were picked.

Use frozen, when you just can't shake the craving.

Sometimes a swirl of fresh Northwest raspberries in your yogurt or a pan of blueberry crumble can't be satisfied in any other way.

Rather pay a premium for fresh berries shipped from south of the equator, frozen local berries are a better substitute, Niland Dunn says.

"We're the berry capital of the world," Niland Dunn says. "I would never think of buying berries from anywhere else because they are so good and so readily available."

Local produce frozen at peak tastes better and retains more nutrients than "fresh" that's been shipped a long distance, she says.

Frozen peas, even if they are not local, are always an easy way to get vegetables into pot pies or even making a minty puree. Frozen corn and broccoli are also great to use.

Use off-season foods as a supplement to some of the hardier, local fare.

There are a few fresh vegetables that Niland Dunn would be hard-pressed to pick up in the grocery store in January. Tomatoes and asparagus have a peak season and a peak flavor that can't be matched by any that she would find in a grocery store in January. But items like non-local delicate lettuce greens can be mixed with some of the tougher local ingredients like kale or cabbage to make a winter salad. A greenhouse-grown bell pepper might be simply necessary for a batch of jambalaya. And an avocado dressed with fresh oranges, red onions and a citrus vinaigrette actually feels like a seasonal meal when you're craving a raw and fresh complement to a braised meat dish or stew.

Use a tool to shred, chop or spiral.

Another tip from Niland Dunn to make raw vegetables like carrots, beets and root vegetables like turnips more palatable is to use the mandoline to create shredded or shaved shapes.

She says the new fad – spiralizers – that turn vegetables like carrots into curlicues also helps turn some firm textured vegetables into a visually appealing dish. A salad of shoestring carrots and beets, for example, is a fresh, healthy way to add a bright flavor and texture against a winter casserole.

CABBAGE WITH APPLES AND ONIONS

Claire Niland Dunn chose the following recipe to coincide with the "Harvest of the Month" program, which promotes a Whatcom-grown produce on school lunch, catering and restaurant menus throughout the county. January's harvest is apples.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 medium onions, peeled and thinly sliced (see note)
- 1 large garlic clove, minced
- 1 large cabbage, cored, cut into quarters and thinly sliced (see note)
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 2 firm cooking apples, such as Jonagold, peeled, cored and thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons packed dark brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons vinegar (see note)
- 2 teaspoons fresh thyme leaves
- 1 bay leaf
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Melt the butter in a large pan and add the onions. Stir over medium heat for about 10 minutes until softened. Stir in the garlic and cook for another minute.

Turn the heat to high and add the cabbage, stock, apples, brown sugar, vinegar, herbs and spices. Stir. Bring the mixture to a boil; immediately reduce the heat to low and simmer gently for about a half-hour or until tender, stirring occasionally. You may need to add 1-2 tablespoons more stock or water if the mixture seems too dry while simmering. Taste and adjust seasonings. Discard the bay leaf and serve.

NOTE: Use red onion and red wine vinegar with red cabbage; use yellow onion and apple cider vinegar with Savoy and green cabbage. Avoid Napa cabbage; its tender texture will not hold up as well.

Makes 4 servings.



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