

SEASONAL EATING FOR BETTER HEALTH

By Owen Rothstein

So, is it *locavore* or *localvore*? According to the Oxford University Press, both forms of the word are used to describe people who only eat food grown within a prescribed radius (say 100 miles) of where they're eating it. The first version was *locavore* and started in San Francisco in the mid 2000s. That version was awarded the Oxford American Dictionary's Word of the Year for 2007. The second version *localvore* sprung out of other communities a bit later and seems mostly attributed to Vermont. Whichever version you prefer (I'll use *localvore* going forward, in honor of my east coast roots), the movement has become the darling of marquis chefs, hippie types, millennials and so-called health nuts across the nation. I can see the cache that it has from a marketing perspective – the whole Farm-to-Table idea – but is there any substance or science to it? Perhaps history can shed some light.

Throughout history, humans have eaten foods that were grown locally and seasonally. It wasn't an idea or a movement, we simply didn't have a choice. Kill a bison that had fed on local grasses and drag it back to the cave. Pluck a ripe orange, apple or plum off of the local tree and eat it before it rots. And so it went for thousands of years. We evolved eating this way. Today we have access to all types of foods from all parts of the globe during all seasons. Modern technology has changed everything about our diets, from the foods we eat – like overly-processed foods – to when we eat those foods. We're lucky to have this luxury, but are we actually doing the right thing for our bodies or the planet?

*****Fair warning – sciencey stuff coming...**

It turns out that the conversation about localvores goes hand-in-hand with the conversation about seasonal eating. Putting aside the idea of globalized cuisine for a moment, there are two main contributing factors to the foods that have been available to us throughout history. The first one is the climate in which we live. I'm not going to pretend to be an expert in agriculture, but beyond basic 8th grade biology class, I trained as a sommelier (wine dude) in a former life and have some grasp on farming as it affects viticulture. In the US, the west coast and southern states have longer growing seasons and have more available fresh foods as a result. Climate also affects what is grown in those areas. Can you imagine trying to grow oranges in Maine?

The second contributing factor is the daily light/dark cycle, which is a result of the season and distance from the equator. Summer has the longest daylight and winter has the longest darkness. Recent studies have revealed that not only do our bodies have an "internal clock" that is affected by seasonal light and darkness, but that every cell in our bodies has its own individual internal clock. What's more is that each of your individual organs has internal clocks of their own that operate independently of other organs. These clocks, all of which are themselves affected by the seasons, can affect your sleep/wake cycle, hormone levels, blood glucose levels and even hunger. As it turns out, all of these systems and clocks can affect your activity levels, fitness, performance and even your waistline. The result is that all of these factors affect your nutritional needs...seasonally.

The takeaway from all of this should be that evolution and habit has formed a specific pattern in or eating throughout the ages. It should follow that by aligning our diets to nature and eating with the seasons, we stand a better

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chance of minimizing imbalances within our bodies that may negatively affect our health. There are simple, everyday seemingly innocuous choices that make perfect examples of misalignment with the seasons. I mentioned that I live on the east coast, specifically in the northeast. I love a good salad with vibrant greens and all sorts of veggies. I eat them all the time, no matter the season. It would seem difficult to argue that this is an unhealthy choice, however it doesn't make any sense seasonally. Having a raw salad in the northeast on a cold day in the middle of winter (when those veggies aren't available here) probably isn't what the cells in my body are screaming for. An optimal meal might be a thick hot stew of root vegetables and beans. It may just mean switching out the spring mix in my salad for a cold-weather cabbage.

To circle back to my opening statements, a great first step to eating seasonally is to eat locally. Apart from the benefit to the local economy, if you shop at local markets and get to know the people that you're buying your food from, you'd be amazed at the networks that you can tap into. For a number of years, I was a member of a local CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) for produce. You buy a share at the beginning of the season and you get a share of the produce that is, um... produced throughout the harvest. Green beans, beets, strawberries, whatever is in season at the moment. The operators at the CSA knew lots of local pig farmers, chicken farmers and orchards through their larger food-producing community. The result was that I got access to amazing local free-range chicken, smoked bacon and a greater variety of foods than I likely would have eaten otherwise. I even took a partial share in a tree-fruit CSA and got pears that rivaled the amazing pears from Harry & David's that people send me over the holidays.

Supply logistics have always made it the case in rural areas, but now most big cities have chefs that have embraced the Farm-to-Table ideal and are producing seasonal menus to the delight of urban foodies. Finding these types of venues makes it a lot easier to follow a seasonal eating diet when you're out and about. All in all, I hate to tell anyone to exclude things from their diets. I usually suggest adding more "good choices" and let the poorer choices take care of themselves. So start adding more local, seasonal food to your diet and drop me a line to let me know how you feel. Maybe I'll run into you at the CSA.



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