



Eating Local for the Holidays: A Tasty Challenge

Sara Southerland

Those of us living in Whatcom County are a hearty bunch. This time of year when the days are dark and the rain runs sideways, we carry on—perhaps caught up in the holiday bustle, picking up the last essential ingredient or gifts on our list. The first thing that comes to mind for me this season is the food. Dreaming about the fresh harvest I'll find at the Farmers Market each week and what savory or sweet concoction I will create from the bounty.

These dark, cold days also mean more wood on the fire and warm apple cider in our mugs. Lots of soups, hearty foods, and sweet baked goods and we know the full swing of the holidays is here. Though holiday meal planning can be a daunting task, incorporating local ingredients into your dishes is not. Whether you're pulling out all of grandma's recipes or just starting from scratch, there are so many ways to include more local foods, and the holidays are a great place to start.

Local foods don't have to be more expensive. A co-worker and her husband recently took the Hunger Challenge, which meant eating on a food stamp budget, around \$5 a day/each for a week. Vowing to use only local and organic ingredients, she embarked on a week's worth of delicious organic meals using whole foods and local ingredients. Sourcing from their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) box, staple foods like rice and beans, gleaned apples from a neighbor's tree, and enjoying fresh, local, and organic eggs and chicken, they were successful. To do so, though, they had to commit to cutting items they considered luxuries like sugar, alcohol, and even reduced their cheese and nuts for the week. All in all, they said they ate nutritiously and enjoyed their meals.

With some practice, you'll learn to maximize your money while supporting local farms and your values. Start with a few local ingredients and keep an open mind to creative cooking.

Here are some easy tips to get started eating local for the holidays:

- Get more local in your shopping bag. There is a bounty of local foods available, from baking ingredients like flour, butter, eggs and other dairy products, to harvest vegetables like winter squashes, root vegetables like potatoes, carrots, beets, and parsnips; from heritage pasture-raised meats like turkey, chicken, duck, beef, pork, and fresh seafood to locally produced wines, beers, cider, and more—there is much to choose from that is grown, raised, or caught in Whatcom County.
- Build your menu based on what foods are in season and locally available from locally owned grocery stores, or just stick to your standby menu plan and add a local ingredient or two to each traditional dish.
- Let your ingredients guide conversations around the table. Let your guests know where your ingredients came from, and that your purchases support local farms and the economy as well as having great taste and value.

In our northwest corner of Washington, we are lucky that we have so many local farms, food purveyors, and artisans growing and producing an abundance of healthy and delicious foods—just for us.

So during this holiday season, challenge yourself to include more locally grown and produced foods. You will taste the difference and know that you are contributing to a stronger local economy and supporting local farms. Here's to a healthy and happy winter with your loved ones and family—from our local farmers to your holiday plate. Salut!

For more information, check these resources: www.pugetsoundfresh.org/eatlocal, www.slowfoodusa.org/eatlocalfirst.org, www.localharvest.org, www.eatinseason.wordpress.com.

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Fall is sweet potato time, which makes me very happy. The sweet potato is one of my favorite vegetables and often my dinner. I've made more meals out of sweet potatoes than I can count, and I mean really simple ones: a sweet potato with tangy goat cheese or a pool of melting butter, smoked salt, and plenty of pepper. That plus a salad is a frequent winter meal. I'm relieved to know that sweet potatoes are considered nutritional powerhouses because I'd be hard pressed to give them up.

Sweet potato time is also when people start asking about the difference between sweet potatoes and yams, a confusion that persists. The yam is a starchy, dry, tropical vegetable that grows in West Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia. Sweet potatoes grow here and are related to the morning glory. If you see them side by side you can see that they're different, but the word "yam" has crept into the sweet potato nomenclature not only because of misuse, but also because there are two basic kinds of sweet potatoes. There are those that are "firm" (or dry-fleshed) and those referred to as "soft" (or moist-fleshed). The firm, dry types were the first to be grown in the U.S.,

Sweet Potatoes Are Back

Deborah Madison

so when the soft ones were introduced, growers decided to use the word "yam" to distinguish their moist sweet potatoes from the others.

This probably shouldn't have happened, but it did, and the habit still persists. People have candied yams on Thanksgiving and Garnet and Jewel sweet potatoes are typically called yams, even though they're not.

My local co-op sells five kinds of sweet potatoes at any one time, but sadly, most shoppers see but two or three varieties—and only the soft kinds. So here are the names of some other varieties to look for and try.

Dry Fleshed (Firm) Sweet Potatoes

In general, Asian and East Indian cultures favor dry sweet potato varieties. Since they resemble chestnuts, their cooked flesh can be used where chestnut purees are called for. Being nuttier and less sugary than the moist varieties, I find the dries more versatile: good in a salad, compatible with curry spices, happy to be glazed with honey, ginger, and soy sauce, transformed into velvety custards or sweet potato pies but also delicious roasted. In Japan I've encountered vendors selling hot, roasted sweet potatoes as a snack—and what a great snack on a cold day!

Kotobuki: A long, golden-skinned tuber with dry, straw colored, nutty-tasting flesh.

Hanna: These are short, stubby tubers with pointy ends, slightly darker skin and golden flesh. The chestnut flavor in this tuber is especially rich and good.

Okinawa or Hawaiian: These tubers are generally small and, with grayish skin, not too attractive—at least on the outside. Their flesh, however, is a gorgeous magenta and the flavor rich and sweet. Try it as a base for ice cream or a custard.

Yellow Jersey: Grown in the Mid-Atlantic states, these have orange skins and dry, sweet, yellow flesh.

Moist (Soft) Sweet Potatoes

In contrast to the dry sweet potatoes, the soft varieties are intensely sweet—essentially ready-made desserts (although we do eat them as vegetables). But if you're going the dessert route, you can simply drizzle molasses and cream into their mashed flesh, or turn them into luscious winter puddings and pies. When making candied sweet potatoes for Thanksgiving, I like to use different varieties, with their skin on and sliced lengthwise and layered so you can enjoy their different shades of orange.

Garnet: Deep purple skin, dark orange flesh, very sweet, well-balanced flavor. Grown in California, Garnet is usually widely available.

Diana: Purple skin, orange flesh, moist and exceptionally sweet. Diana was developed to replace the Garnet because of

shipping and storage problems due to the Garnet's thin skin.

Jewel: Another sweet, super-moist orange-fleshed sweet potato with a coppery, rather than red-orange skin. Jewel accounts for 75 percent of all the commercially produced varieties and can be held in storage (under controlled conditions; not your home refrigerator) for up to fifty weeks, which explains why it's nearly always available.

Beauregard: Similar to Jewel, with purple-rose skin and orange flesh, it matures early, but sweetsens only after two months in storage.

The sweetness of these vegetables can be tempered by pairing them with horseradish, ginger, cumin, curry spices of all kinds, coconut milk, coriander, chile, and so forth. If you fry leftover sweet potatoes in a little butter or oil, their sugars will caramelize and balance their sweetness as well; plus they're really good this way.

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Note:

The Co-op produce departments frequently have many of these varieties of sweet potatoes when they're available. We also carry a dry-fleshed (firm) variety called Japanese. For more information, ask any of our produce staff—they really know their spuds!