



## Misty's View of Tackling Fresh, Local Produce

**M**ore and more these days, people are embracing the wonders of local farmers' markets. Getting through a winter of pale and sometimes flavourless imports is becoming increasingly difficult, especially when one knows that ripe, fragrant, and delicious produce can be had.

When I lived in the south of France, I was surrounded by small markets that showed off their tender veggies and delicate flowers with love and quotidian pride. Supermarkets, in contrast, sold laundry soap and dog food.

We, however, live in a grid of four seasons that range in temperatures from freezing to broiling. Hence, the all-season vegetable was born and soon showed up in every grocery store in our part of the world. Convenience and a seamless demand of out-of-season fruits and vegetables have virtually become the norm. As a result, in many cases we have forgotten what fresh and ripe really means.

If you are not already starting to tune into the gifts of the summer and autumn seasons, I suggest

that you do. It is really fun to **wait for certain fruits and veggies to arrive naturally** and then celebrate their arrival in a purposeful way. Just having strawberries on your morning yogurt 365 days of the year is not the same as waiting until June to have the real deal!

I am not suggesting abstaining from strawberries during the local off season, I'm encouraging you to take a break from the daily fodder in anticipation of **a ripe explosion of local flavour and fresh texture**. Do some fact finding to determine what is going to show up on your produce market shelves and await these jewels with eager anticipation.

As a burgeoning chef, I had to learn when asparagus comes in, or fiddleheads, and that early butternut squash has a bland flavour and a watery texture before August. Doing this kind of research yourself will inform and liberate you. If you don't already know that August is the season for the best beefsteak tomatoes, then you should.

In my family, even in the moderately-un-schooled times of the 1960s, we always waited for these large, imposing tomato structures to arise from local fields and make all previous tomatoes look like imposters. Sometimes these tomatoes had the power to take second fiddle to the steaks they were side-kicks to, especially when cut an inch thick and slathered in homemade blue cheese dressing! The best of the '60s is still delicious today, if you wait for the right tomato.

There is something so hopeful about **bringing home a large wicker basket of fresh market fruits and vegetables**. But that is where the optimism may die, when the task of hand crafting these raw products into family menu items meets one's lack of knife-handling skills.

### Beware of Gadgets

Learning how to use a French knife is infinitely less difficult than learning how to ride a bike.

All it takes is a little one-on-one instruction from someone who knows how. Last August, I gave my friend's university-bound son a going-away present. I taught him how to use a variety of knives, and hear that he now gives dinner parties for his friends all the time.

Let's face it, vegetables need to be transformed from their raw potential into a more manageable form. Consider a butternut squash for example; it can take on monolithic proportions when being wrestled into the tender submission of a spiced puree. Fear of peeling the waxy exterior, cutting the sculpture in half without losing a digit, and then creating uniform marshmallow-sized chunks can be a permanent impediment if one does not tackle the underlying problem, a lack of knife skills or lack of practice.

I suggest that you pick up a good, sharp knife, and slice soft vegetables like cucumbers, to gain some dexterity. Make sure always to place a damp piece of paper towel under your work board to ensure a stable surface. Experiment with cutting different but uniform pieces of vegetables in order to gain the skills required for making a vegetable soup, stew, or a delicate garnish for a green salad.

Beware of products that slap veggies into pieces; they only create damage. Vegetables need to be cut cleanly so as not to crush the cells and produce a watery mess. Gadgets are never the answer; getting to know your fruits and vegetables is! It is a relationship that will lead you to even greater anticipation of our local harvests and will help you develop a love for cooking too.

Crying over some onions may well be worthwhile if it leads you to becoming your family's loving and artful chef.

*Misty Ingraham and Bill Sharpe own Ancaster's catering business The Portable Feast at Home.*