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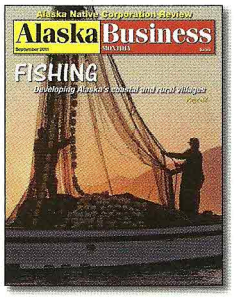
The crew of the seine boat, Ocean Spirit, fishes for wild Alaska salmon at Lucky Cove, south of Ketchikan. Cover photo by Clark James Mishler.



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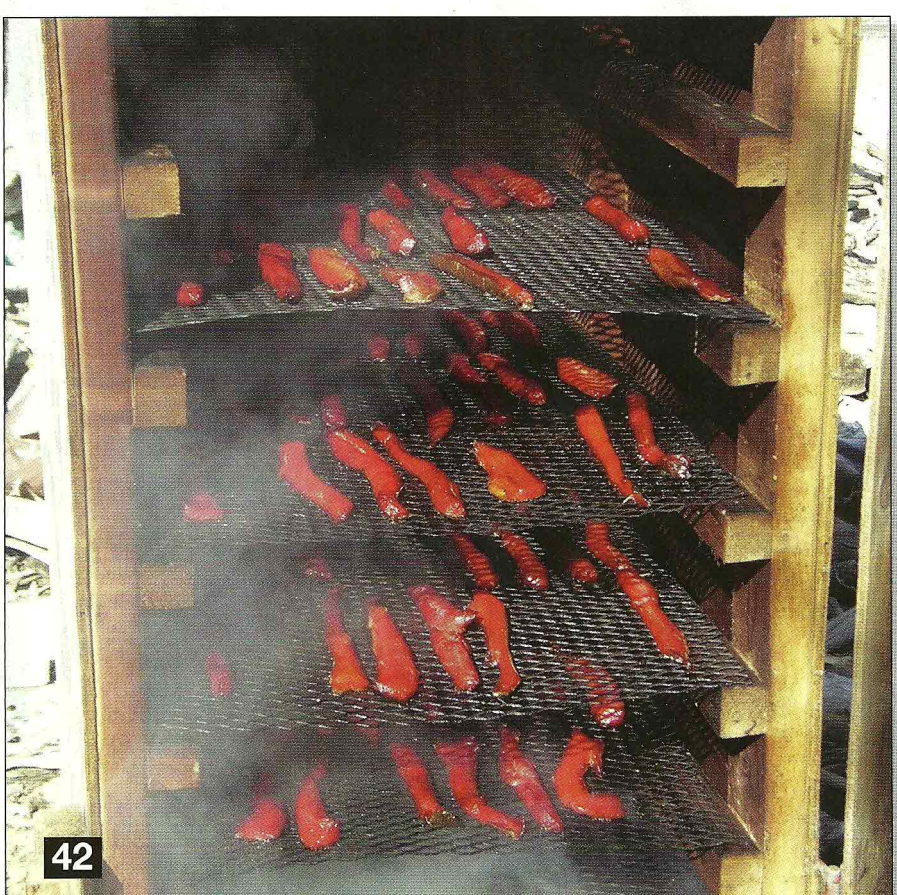

Photo by Susan Sommer

Photo by Susan Sommer

Urban laying hens are quiet.

ALASKA FOOD CHALLENGE

Eating local for a year

BY SUSAN SOMMER

Photo by Susan Sommer

Cooking fresh moose ribs over a beach fire.

What does it take to eat locally produced and grown food for one year in Alaska? Plenty of residents enjoy moose, fish, wild berries and veggies during summer, but what about dairy, grains and access to Alaska foods year-round? How many people would give up coffee? Supporting the local food movement is gaining popularity in Alaska, as evidenced by a diverse group of optimists involved in the Alaska Food Challenge, a grassroots collaboration formed over several evenings of cold-winter-night discussions about eating locally for a year.

The Challenge kicked off June 21, summer solstice, representing a good time to make changes. The group is informal but meets regularly, and welcomes an array of individual goals, many of which are personal – for better health or a personal challenge – but some are aimed at changing Alaska's basic food supply chain.

WHY EAT LOCAL?

Whether omnivore or vegan, knowing where their food comes from and what's in it is the number one reason given by Alaska-food fans. Keeping money in the local economy, and meeting the farmers, fishers and ranchers are also cited as important. Other factors are freshness, superior taste and reducing their environmental footprint.

For some, eating local is a tradition that offers a strong sense of connection. Lifelong Alaskan Eowyn Ivey of Palmer says: "It's a part of our lifestyle and family tradition. It makes me feel more connected to the place, both in harvesting and eating local foods. We go hunting, fishing, berry picking. We grow our own garden, and as much as possible purchase local foods at the grocery store. I think it's an important piece in understanding and appreciating the natural world, and I want to pass that on to my children."

While individual reasons vary widely for choosing Alaska foods, statewide entities have been focusing on food security in recent years. It's estimated that 95 percent of the state's food is shipped here from thousands of miles away. A major disruption to transportation could quickly leave local larders running low.

Carol Lewis, dean of the University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences and director of the Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, says legislation supporting a food security research project is "absolutely a critical piece if we are to move toward a secure food supply in Alaska." Funding for this remains scarce.

Alaska is still struggling with a definition of food security, says Lewis. She envisions production of foods suited to Alaska's climate, including using extended season growing technology at all levels. Lewis says distribution is also part of the equation, "including marketing that is appropriate to specific locations. For example in Delta and Fairbanks that might look like a typical Midwest system with food going to brokers or wholesalers and then into retail outlets as well as food sold by CSAs (community supported agriculture) and farmers markets or smaller retail outlets and cooperatives. In rural Alaska it might look quite different."

Photo courtesy of Sitka Local Foods Network

Jonathan Cox is the lead gardener at Sitka's St. Peters Fellowship Farm.

It also is important to have the capability to process and store vegetables and livestock, as well as to bring in supplies necessary for food production, Lewis says.

UAF has recently conducted a statewide survey to update information about Alaska-produced and -grown foods. It's the springboard for a larger goal: to help Alaska's food producers meet the growing demand by "locavores," those who eat as much local food as possible.

And whether they know it or not, kids are getting in on the locavores movement, too. The State's Farm to School program works toward more local foods in school lunches, says Johanna Herron, program coordinator. "The Mat-Su school district uses all Matanuska Creamery milk in their schools. Quite a few districts purchase local baby carrots." she said.

Scattered Resources

Busy schedules prevent many people from buying farm-fresh eggs at one location, organic chicken at another, ripe produce at a farmers market and berries at a U-pick. One-stop shopping at large chains such as Fred Meyer, Carrs/Safeway and WalMart offer plenty of edible variety, but other than potatoes and carrots in the bins and Matanuska milk in the coolers, Alaska-grown or produced food is not as abundant as many would like.

"I would like to see local grocery stores get in on the Alaska Food Challenge by setting up a display featuring local foods," says Eagle River resident Julie McDonald, an Alaska Food Challenge member.

Farmers markets during summer help fill the gap. CSAs are growing in popularity among Alaskans; the State of Alaska's Alaska Grown Source Book lists 11 CSAs and five U-pick farms statewide.

But there is no one-stop shopping for all Alaska foods. Yet.

One Fairbanks store, however, has made a successful start. HomeGrown Market focuses on meats, but also carries produce and dairy. To anyone who says buying local is too expensive for them, owner Jeff Johnson says: "After you consider the amount of waste from spoiled produce, or the chemicals that are put in or on the meat, the cost becomes very even. You get what you pay for."

Johnson takes pride in knowing his suppliers personally and providing their fresh, healthy products to his customers.

A similar effort at starting an all-Alaska food co-op is under way in Anchorage. Mary Ernsberger, a Challenge member, and others are researching how best to go about opening what they are calling the Fresh from Alaska Food Co-Op. "We really need more volunteers that have time to do the outreach," Ernsberger says, and added that it's easy enough to find local dairy, seafood, red meat and root vegetables throughout the year in the Anchorage area, but offering fresh local greens in a co-op during winter is tough. Attempts have been made at offering year-round produce; a company growing micro greens for sale in Anchorage in 2010 closed its doors for financial reasons after a short-lived, yet much celebrated, stint. Demand is there. Filling it efficiently is the hard part.

Feast or Famine?

The question looming for those planning to eat close to 100 percent Alaska foods for the year-long Alaska Food Challenge is this: How can I give up my favorite foods? Not surprisingly, the two items that many agree would be the hardest are not foods at all, but drinks – coffee and alcohol. Some Challenge members plan to try brewing their own

Photo by Susan Sommer

Alaska Food Resources

Alaska Food Challenge Group:
http://akpermaculture.ning.com
Alaska Food Challenge:
open group on Facebook
Alaska Cooperative Extension Service:
www.uaf.edu/ces
Alaska Community Agriculture:
www.alaskacommunityag.org
Alaska Farmers Market Association:
www.alaskafarmersmarkets.org
Alaska Pioneer Fruit Growers Association:
http://apfga.org
State of Alaska, Dept. of Natural Resources, Division of Agriculture:
http://dnr.alaska.gov/ag/index.htm
Farm to School Program:
http://dnr.alaska.gov/ag/ag_FTS.htm
Alaska Food Policy Council blog:
www.alaskafoodpolicy.blogspot.com
FoodRoutes:
www.foodroutes.org
Community Food Security Coalition:
www.foodsecurity.org

beer, though it's still unclear whether Alaska-grown barley (there are two types – animal grade and human grade) will work as an ingredient.

Coffee, it seems, is the sacred cow. Teas made from dried Alaska plants don't contain caffeine, and neither does dried, ground dandelion root, which can be brewed through a filter for a hot drink that tastes remarkably similar to coffee. But it's not quite the same. The solution, for most, is to buy locally roasted coffee beans.

Other basics not produced in Alaska are salt and sugar. Honey from local bees can replace sugar. Dried seaweed crumbled into a sweet treat that calls for a pinch of salt may or may not give it a "fishy" taste. Challenge devotees, though, are game for trying new ways of pleasing their palate.

Saskia Esslinger, de facto organizer of the Alaska Food Challenge, says she plans a few exceptions such as salt, baking powder and cheese-making cultures, none of which are available locally and which have a small food carbon footprint. As for how a mostly Alaska foods diet might affect her health, Esslinger says she and her husband "will be eliminating processed foods from our diet, as well as refined flour and sugar. I am excited to break my dependence on these items."

When asked why she's doing this, Esslinger says, "There are so many (reasons), but the main one is just to prove that it can be done. To change people's perception that Alaska food is limited in quantity or quality. The point isn't just to survive it, but to flourish in it, to demonstrate the abundance that is all around us. To discover new alternatives and open up new markets for Alaska products. We hope this will be a catalyst to strengthen Alaska's food system so that more of our food dollars stay in Alaska and we are more food-secure should energy prices continue to rise or a natural disaster should happen."

Eagle River resident Cindee Karns is more representative of others taking the Challenge. She says she's "not going to be a purist." She reaps plenty of produce from her mountainside gardens, and harvests moose, salmon and halibut. Karns estimates less than half the foods she and her husband eat now are from Alaska sources, a common estimate among Alaska-food enthusiasts. Her goal in the Challenge is to make an economic impact by keeping the money local and increase demand for, and hence supply of, Alaska foods statewide.

Being an agent of change is an uphill battle. Every time she gets an espresso now, Karns asks if they are using local milk. "They kind of look at me and say Costco's cheaper," she says.

Eating locally is not a new concept, but rather a return to human history's roots. For many Alaska locavores or those who've become "locavore-curious," Barbara Kingsolver's book "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life" was a key inspiration; reading it emphasizes how disconnected most Americans are from their food sources. Alaska Food Challenge members seek to explore a similar adventure in a much harsher environment.

Though a handful of people eating locally sourced foods for a year might not immediately affect the way Alaska's food supply chain functions, it might very well plant the seeds of change. ❑