



Eating Seasonally and Locally in South Central Indiana

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EVER SINCE I ATE SNAKE

In the early days on the farm, when we were striving for self-sufficiency, we tried to eat everything. Some have not become traditional favorites. I cooked raccoon for hours before the dark purple flesh became tender enough to swallow, long after JoAnna and the girls had gone to bed. I ate it anyway.

Possum is too fat. Its greasy, white flesh was not appealing to anyone but me. Folklore, here and in China, says snapping turtles contain five different kinds of meat, but after numerous tries, sauces, and methods of preparation, all parts tasted like tough pond mud. Besides, the turtles are mean and aggressive. If one bites you, it hangs on until it thunders.

Eating local and seasonal foods has been a part of our food ethos since JoAnna and I settled onto a rundown farm in 1957. Our inspiration, then and now, has been a back-to-the-land and health food movement that has afflicted a certain segment of American intellectuals since the 1840s.

Our farm straddles Ramp Creek, and the ramps—dark green, wild leek-garlic-onion plants—are the first sign of renewed life after the winter. For the first 30 years, my cows, as anxious as any of us for a fresh bite, got to the ramps before I could. Thanks to a patched up fence line, the ramps now cover the wooded hillsides from mid-March to mid-April. We serve them up with eggs, pasta, and steak and sell them to fancy restaurants.

Next come wild greens in April and May. Our favorites are poke and lamb's quarter. In spring in the early 1960s, when I was crisscrossing Monroe County daily for the federal Conservation Service, older ladies in aprons and bonnets were a common sight, gathering wild greens alongside country roads and railroad tracks. I continue to hunt for morel mushrooms every year, though I never find many, not being Indiana-born. Our youngest daughter, Jane, a birthright Hoosier, finds a few.

By late spring, our garden (what Hoosiers call a Democratic garden: large, weedy, and messy) is producing tender lettuces, red radishes, and scallions. Together they require only a little oil and vinegar and salt.

Next are the summer squashes; bright yellow crooknecks are our favorites. By mid-June, new potatoes are ready. If paired with English peas, baby potatoes fresh out of the dirt are an unparalleled treat.

The garden starts to come on strong in July. Frances Trollope told her British readers in the 1830s that Indiana tomatoes are the most flavorful in the world. For our 50th wedding anniversary, JoAnna built me a small greenhouse. For a couple of years, I grew tomatoes year-round. But, I gave it up. It ruined the exhilaration of the first summer tomato.

Silver Queen sweet corn is hard to beat, its complex flavor full of unidentifiable components. With successive plantings, the corn and tomatoes and other vegetables are on our plates until fall.

When the temperature finally cools enough to hang a carcass, we slaughter a plump young heifer. It is a family and friend occasion. The men and boys tend to the slaughter. The liver, weighing several pounds, is carefully extracted and carried to the women in the kitchen. When the work is done, we all grab a beer and sit down to a world-class feast with the liver fried up in bacon and onions.

Maple syrup is newly available in February, but is a year-long treat, especially on pancakes and fresh, Earlyglow strawberries. In the late 19th century, Indiana was the number one producer of maple syrup. It's still the best; each year's vintage is different. The best sap comes from trees growing on an eastern slope, on loess, glacial till atop residual limestone soil, in northwest Monroe County.

We look forward to wild meats—from fat, young squirrels in late summer to deer meat in the fall and wild ducks in the winter, especially wood ducks furnished by my friend, John Gallman, a gentleman, a scholar, and a great hunter.

Ever since I ate snake in southern China on one of my trips there in the 1970s, I have wanted to try an American snake, maybe one of those six-foot-long black snakes that have lived in our attic for generations. Maybe this year.

While searching for a renowned dog restaurant in Shangsa, China, on a sweltering August day, the locals told us in no uncertain terms, "only barbarians eat dog in the summer." What we eat, and what we don't eat, has long defined us as a people, a tribe, or as individuals. What we eat is not as vital as the love with which it is prepared and served and eaten.