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To Everything There Is A Season. Including Dinner.

GREEN BEANS, AND THEN TOMATOES

At every summer camp sing-along, somewhere between Michael rowing the boat ashore and the s'mores-and-kum-bi-yas grand finale, millions of campers raise their voices to tell us that to everything (turn, turn, turn) there is a season.

What we fail to recognize is that they are singing about more than a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant, a time to reap, and whatever else Pete Seeger borrowed from Ecclesiastes. They are also singing about dinner.

To everything there may be a season, but you wouldn't know it by what we eat.

Let's take a stroll through the produce section of your Average American Food-O-Rama, shall we?

Do you want muskmelon in January? You'll find them right over there, next to the big red strawberries in the plastic clamshell boxes. Tomatoes are in that bin next to the bags of salad, in the cooler with the snow peas. Corn on the cob? It's on those Styrofoam trays, covered in plastic wrap.

Now, what have we just seen, really?

We've seen a muskmelon—cantaloupe for those of you not raised in the wilds of Northern Indiana—the size of a Chicago-style 16-inch softball, with about the same amount of flavor. Devoid of the melon's enchanting perfume, hard as Styrofoam, it is a mockery of what your muskmelon should be, or would be if you'd just wait until they're in season.

We've seen strawberries—well, that's what it says on the box. Anything that big really belongs in its own separate category. Frankenberry would work if the name hadn't already been used for a cereal, which is itself a whole new adventure in artificial flavor.

But back to the big red things. Whatever they are, they're not strawberries. For starters, real strawberries aren't the size of billiard balls. They have flavor and juice. They're tender. Remember this tip when you go shopping for fruit: strawberries are not supposed to crunch.

We've seen other red things being passed off as tomatoes. Actually, they're tennis balls. They really should start using these things at Wimbledon because they sure don't belong on a salad or a sandwich, unless of course you already augment your salads and sandwiches with paperweights, door stops, and dog toys.

Why do we buy these things, anyway? Or more to the point, why do we eat them?

Part of it, I suspect, is longing. Our out-of-season memories recall all too well the flood of sweet juice from a ripe June strawberry, the signature tang of a home-grown tomato, the crunch of fresh summer corn. The salivary glands kick in and before you know it, they have somehow levitated out of the bin and into your grocery cart.

I think you can also blame selfishness. We of the Instant Gratification Generation want cantaloupe in January, so we are by-God (or, actually not, since God designed cantaloupe to be good in summer) going to have it. It turns out to be a bad bargain, though. You get what you want, but you pay for it in terms of price (high) and quality (not so much).

And we have gotten away from eating seasonally. To everything (turn turn turn) there is a season (turn turn turn), and that's why the strawberries are so wonderful during the short time they're available, and so hard to swallow when they're not.

To our credit, we still get some things right. Once or twice a year, a turkey dinner is fabulous. More than that and it just turns into Big Chicken. We respect the turkey season.

But then we turn around and do something completely stupid, like having a cookout in a blizzard, so it balances out.

To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven. To eat seasonally is to know that the good asparagus will only be in season a short while, so we must enjoy it while we can ... knowing that soon after will come pea season, and then green beans, and then tomatoes, and so on, each a delight in its own time, its own place in a cycle deserving of our full appreciation and respect.

The earth moves at a pace, a tempo that is beyond our control. To eat seasonally is to be in sync with that tempo, to nourish our spirits as well as our bodies, and to allow them fuller connection with this place, this planet, this life. Try it. Come on, just a bite. It's good for you.