

Hogtown HomeGrown™

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The traveling locavore

Whether it is just a routine business trip, a football weekend away or a long-awaited excursion to an exotic location, for me, half the fun of traveling is finding out about someplace new. What is the pride of the area? Art museums or street murals? Repurposed buildings or modern architecture? Tourist attractions or hidden gems? Of course, I also want to know what everyone is eating and what's grown or made locally. Learning what makes a destination unique can make any trip more interesting.

Having the internet at our fingertips allows us to find, in a moment, the information that travelers in my mother's generation had to either write away for or research using microfilmed magazines and newspapers. Back in 1977, my parents took a cross-country car trip to see America. Mom spent months planning, used lots of postage stamps and made dozens of phone calls to reserve hotels and attractions that I can now look up and book in minutes.

In addition to local attractions, I like to visit farmers markets and grocery stores, especially if we have access to a kitchen and can cook some of our own meals. No matter where we are going, this traveling locavore takes the time to find out where farmers sell their wares, what the locals eat and what's in season during our visit. There are more and more restaurants selling local food and it is just as easy to seek out a local restaurant, not to mention way more fun, as it is to stop at a chain along the highway.

Even on an international trip, local flavors can make all the difference. Bad weather during a cruise I took with Mom led us to an unplanned port in Sardinia. Faced with the sight of all the tourist-trap shops within walking distance of the pier, we took a little time for research in the ship's library. A guide book helped us discover a rooftop café overlooking the harbor that served the local specialty of hand-made pasta topped with fresh or dried mullet roe. A quick Google search disclosed a 150 year old three-story food market. We proved our traveling locavore reputations by shopping for bagfuls of food souvenirs which we ferried back to the ship on a local bus. The rest of the trip was wonderful, but that day of local treasures will always be extra special.

Keeping it local does make a trip special, but not just for the travelers. Imagine the impact of tourist money paid to a local farmer or baker or café owner. Traveling as a locavore can have a direct effect on the economies of wherever you go, whether you are a family taking the big trip for the year or a football fan tailgating in a new town every week. Heading out of town for a vacation or an away game this year? Become a traveling locavore, seek out the area's specialties and source both your food and your souvenirs locally. If you are stay-cationing or tailgating here in Hogtown, keep it local at home by supporting our fabulous farmers markets, local grocers and independently-owned restaurants.

What's Fresh Right Now?

Bananas

Beans—green/purple long

Cucumbers—slicers, burpless

Eggplant—oriental, italian, fairytale, nubia, long

Greens—kale, collards

Herbs—tulsi, thai/italian basil, lime leaf, spearmint

Honey—orange blossom, gallberry, wildflower, everglades

Lettuce—red/green leaf

Moringa

Mushrooms

Okra—red/green

Onions—red/yellow/white, green

Peas—creamer, white acre, black eyes, pink eyes

Peppers—red/green/yellow/orange sweet bell, aji, poblano, cayenne, shishito, jalapeño

Potatoes—red/white, creamer, blue, fingerling

Radishes—daikon, black, horseradish

Shoots and Sprouts

Squash—butternut, spaghetti, kabocha, seminole pumpkin, acorn

Tomatoes—grape, cluster, green, yellow/red roma

Turmeric

PUTTING FOOD BY

Italian and Thai basil have been prolific the past few weeks, so I made batches of pesto to store flat in the freezer.

Basil Pesto

Combine 4 packed cups of basil leaves, 4 large chopped garlic cloves, 1 cup pine nuts or walnuts, 1/2 cup olive oil in a food processor and pulse until evenly chunky.

Add 1 cup grated parmesan and, with machine running, stream in an additional 1/2 cup of olive oil.

Measure into freezer bags, press out air, label and freeze flat.

When freezer space is scarce, I air dry basil in bunches. Place the entire bunch, leaves first, into a medium-sized paper bag and gather the top around the stems with a rubber band. Hang in a dark closet or place on a high shelf until leaves are dried. To store long term, strip leaves from stems and place in a glass jar.

Local and Fresh— Long Eggplant

Often referred to as Oriental, long eggplant has varieties linked to Italy as well as Asia. While most have a uniformly thin body, some long eggplant are thin at the stem end with a thicker bottom. The taste is mild and the flesh cooks up creamy. When buying, look for smooth shiny skin and firm flesh. Store in a paper or cloth bag in the warmest spot of the refrigerator.

Greek Eggplant and Shiitakes

INGREDIENTS

6-8 long eggplant, all about the same diameter
2 shallots

6-10 shiitake mushrooms

4 Tablespoons olive oil, divided

3/4 cup chopped flat leaf parsley, divided

Zest and juice of one lemon

1 Tablespoon apple cider or sherry vinegar

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

4 ounces feta, crumbled just before serving

DIRECTIONS

Broil eggplant 6 inches from flame until easily dented with a fingertip. Set aside to cool.

Cut shallots and shiitakes into thin slices of similar size. Heat 2 Tablespoons olive oil in skillet and sauté shallots and shiitakes until tender. Remove from pan and set aside.

Cut off the stem and remove the peel from each eggplant. Cut into 1 inch chunks.

Mix eggplant with shallots and shiitakes. Add 1/2 cup chopped parsley, lemon zest, olive oil, lemon juice and vinegar. Stir to combine. Taste and add salt and pepper as desired.

Serve topped with feta and a little of the reserved parsley. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.



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Yucutan Vegan Tacos

INGREDIENTS

8-12 long eggplant, about 8-10 inches long
1/2 ounce achiote seeds
1 teaspoon Mexican oregano
1 teaspoon whole black peppercorns
1 teaspoon cumin seeds
3 whole cloves
1 inch Mexican canela cinnamon stick
3/4 teaspoon salt
3 large garlic cloves, smashed and chopped
Juice of 2-3 sour oranges OR 4 limes + 1 orange OR 1/3 cup lime juice + 3 T orange juice
A drizzle of olive oil

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to broil and place rack 6 inches from flame.

Broil eggplant until easily dented with a fingertip. Set aside to cool.

In a small bowl, combine achiote seeds, oregano, peppercorns, cumin seeds, cloves and cinnamon stick. Transfer to spice or coffee grinder and process until powdery.

Combine spices with salt and garlic. Mix in juice a little at a time to form a chunky paste. To form a smooth paste, place powdered spices, salt, garlic and juice in a blender.

Remove stem end, peel eggplant and cut into bite-size chunks. Combine eggplant with spice mixture until thoroughly coated. Cover and marinate in the refrigerator for 2-24 hours.

At least three hours before serving, remove eggplant from refrigerator and bring to room temperature. Preheat oven to 300 degrees.

Place marinated eggplant in a covered casserole. Drizzle top with a little olive oil. Cover and cook 2-3 hours, until bubbly.

Serve in warm soft corn tortillas with Pickled Red Onions and habañero salsa.

Tricks and Tips

Yucutan Vegan Tacos were inspired by Cochinita pibil, a slow roasted marinated pork dish from the Yucutan Peninsula of Mexico. Characterized by bright citrus and rich, but not hot, flavors, the spice mixture infuses the eggplant to create this version of the traditional dish.

Yes, there are quite a few spices, but they are all available locally and grinding them yourself creates the best flavor.

It is very important to make sure the eggplant has time to absorb the flavors before cooking it low and slow.

Pickled Red Onion

INGREDIENTS

1 cup thinly sliced red onion (about 1/2 large onion)
3/4 cup lime juice
1/4 cup orange juice

DIRECTIONS

Place onion in a non-aluminum bowl and cover with hot water. After 30 seconds, drain off the water. Combine the juices and pour over the onion. Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes. Serve as a condiment with tacos, wraps or salads. May be made a week in advance.

Tricks and Tips

The citrus flavor and crunchiness of Pickled Red Onion pairs perfectly with the soft, seasoned eggplant. Soaking raw onion in hot water removes its "sting" and helps the citrus juice absorb better.



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Tricks and Tips

As I have gotten older, my taste buds have learned to appreciate chocolate with a high percentage of cocoa. A higher percentage of cocoa means a lower amount of sugar and the result is less sweet but emphasizes the chocolate's true flavor.

New to dark chocolate? Start by trying a variety of brands with cocoa percentages between 60 and 70 percent.

To create Dark Chocolate Mini Cheesecakes, I combined bars of 62% and 70% with part of an 85% bar for a decadent, rich dark chocolate experience.

Dark Chocolate Mini Cheesecakes

INGREDIENTS

- 20 regular-sized cupcake liners
- 20 small chocolate cookies without frosting or filling
- 1/2 cup whipping cream
- 8 ounces dark chocolate, at least 60% cocoa
- 16 ounces cream cheese, not whipped or fat-free
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla
- 1/4 teaspoon salt

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Place cupcake liners in a muffin tin or on a cookie sheet. Place one cookie in the bottom of each cupcake liner. Set aside.

Heat cream and chocolate in a double boiler. Stir until melted. Use a spatula to scrape chocolate into a bowl. Set aside to cool.

Beat cream cheese with hand or stand mixer. For best results, do not use a food processor. Mix in sugar and beat until mixture, when rubbed between your fingers, is smooth. Add eggs, vanilla and salt and beat well. Mix in melted chocolate and stir until completely combined.

Pour 1/4 cup batter over the cookie in each liner. Bake 12-15 minutes until edges are firm to the touch and center is set.

Remove from oven and allow to cool at room temperature. Cover and refrigerate until completely chilled.