

How we made an All Alberta Dinner in January – and lived to tell the tale!

On January 23rd, eight couples from *Couples Who Cook* came together at the home of Charleen Miles and Mel Tyree to celebrate the bounty of our province with an All Alberta Dinner. The challenge we set ourselves was to try and source **all** the ingredients to be used in preparing our meal from Alberta and Alberta alone ... in January.

Fortunately, we had outstanding help from Charleen and Mel who have a deep interest and experience in living locally sustainable lives. And thanks to e-mail, all of the participating couples were able to quickly share information, news of food finds, and offers of home-grown bounty from our pantries and freezers as we scoured the province for delicious things to eat – and drink.

Unlike our usual dinners where the recipes are provided, this time we simply listed the type of dishes to be served and let people come up with the recipes for what they wanted to make. The challenge, of course, was to find recipes with ingredients that we thought we could source from Alberta. Wisely, Charleen made a short list of items that we probably wouldn't be able to find and therefore shouldn't make ourselves crazy about. It was a fairly short list: salt, pepper, vinegar, mayonnaise (because of the vinegar), and olive oil (although we found good, local canola oil). Other items we simply chose to work around: substituting local honey for sugar, baking without baking powder or baking soda, using herbs for flavour instead of vanilla or spices, etc.

Despite our many individual challenges in producing the meal, I'm happy to report it turned out to be a completely delicious evening. We made it a buffet and started with local cheeses and fantastic flat crackers made by Charleen. There was also a shredded carrot, cheese, and onion spread (held together with a little mayo) with fresh parsley. We then dined on a wonderful leek & potato soup – perfect for a winter's evening. Our fish course was next with a beautiful baked fresh pickerel on a bed of celeriac. Our main courses consisted of a substantial squash & bean stew, organic bison steaks with horseradish sauce, and roast chicken with crab-apple sauce. Our sides included a baked root vegetable gratin, roast beets, and baked onions. Our salads included a shredded carrot salad with a horseradish vinaigrette, a shredded beet salad, and an homage to Greek salad made by Mel with local feta cheese – but no olives! Believe it or not, we still had room for dessert – and it was a good thing too as they were so good. We had Saskatoon Berry pie, berry cobbler, and a

gorgeous fruit fool, all accompanied by fresh whipped cream and some lovely vanilla ice cream made by Calgary's Foothills Dairy (no, we did not ask where the vanilla flavour came from J). We enjoyed numerous different brews from Edmonton's Alley Kat Brewery, a number of bottles of en Santé's fruit wines, and at the end of the evening, brewed up some beautiful, locally produced herbal teas.

So, what did we learn from our experience? Well, we learned it's possible to have a proper dinner party in January with (almost) all Alberta ingredients. We learned that with a little effort and planning, you can find an amazing amount of Alberta ingredients, foods and beverages – often in surprising places. Truly, if you look, you will often find. I was amazed that at my local Safeway where I've been shopping for two years, there were Albertan potatoes, onions from Tabor, organic Albertan white and whole-wheat flour (Sunny Boy), and Albertan butter (Foothills) in the dairy case – but I had never noticed them before.

We all became expert at visiting the Old Strathcona Farmer's Market and had some terrific finds there – like a gorgeous piece of horseradish, garlic, fresh herbs, some wonderful local cheeses, and the en Santé fruit wines. We discovered that you can buy a local organic, cold-pressed canola oil (Mighty Trio) at Planet Organic – although you won't find it in the food section, but over in the health supplements area in a refrigerated case along with organic flax and hemp oil. We learned to observe what goes on at the farmer's market, as Sarah says, "We visited the Russian/Ukrainian stand at the farmer's market and discovered that all of their dips and salads are locally sourced and in-season. So we just reproduced (or attempted to reproduce) some of their wonderful creations."

We learned that many of us are going to try and grow more in our own gardens this summer, and store, preserve, and freeze as much of our bounty as possible so we can enjoy more vegetables, herbs, fruit pies, cobblers and fools in January. We are determined to go to farmer's markets more often and make an effort to support local producers. We all found vinegar a problem to source but our brilliant idea is that Alley Kat could be a future source of a good malt vinegar and that en Santé should be encouraged to produce a beautiful raspberry vinegar (the lady at the stall said she'd mention it to the producers), and, of course, given enough time and planning, we could make our own. But most of all, our dinner experience sharpened our awareness of what we eat, where it comes from, and the vitally important role we play in encouraging and supporting a thriving, local food industry.

We hope our small dining experience will be an inspiration to others in our community. The next time you go shopping, why not see how many Albertan ingredients and produce you can source and incorporate into your cooking routines. Have fun. We wish you a delicious, fresh, and healthy Albertan cooking experience!

Here are some vendors we especially liked:

Careit Urban Deli
Fairwinds Dairy
Paddy's Cheese
 Peas on Earth
 Planet Organic
Sunterra
Treestone Bakery

Here's some suggested reading from :

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: a year of food life by Barbara Kingsolver
Hope's Edge: the next Diet for A Small Planet by Frances Moore Lappé
The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals by Michael Pollan
The 100-Mile Diet: a year of local eating by Alisa Dawn Smith