

Serving Up Four-Season Nutrition

Experts recommend families eat locally to stay healthy all year long.

by Kim Seidel


It may be easier than you think to keep your family healthy throughout the year. The answer is right out your own back door: Local foods that are in season provide key defenses to colds, flu bugs, and other ailments that plague our children.

“The earth gives us signals on how to take care of our bodies,” says Caryn Willens, a naturopath in La Crosse. “If we follow the seasons naturally, we can be prepared to keep healthy mentally, emotionally, and physically.”

Each season produces a variety of foods that we can use to maintain the health of our families as the months change from winter to spring to summer to fall.

“We have to think very hard about what we are putting in our body,” says Monique Hooker, a chef, teacher, and author, in De Soto, Wis. She’s spearheading efforts to bring more fresh foods into area schools through the Farm to School project, a national movement to connect healthy foods from local farms to schools’ hot-lunch programs.

At home, to encourage good choices, parents can make a game out of eating healthy, Hooker says. Ask your children, “What is in this food? Where does it come from?” Or look at labels with them in the grocery store. If a food has more than four or five ingredients, there are usually too many preservatives, sugar, and fat in it, Hooker says. Bread, for



Eating healthy can taste great. Check out cpclax.com for a fudge recipe from Caryn Willens, a naturopath cited in this story!

instance, should be made simply with a few ingredients.

Beyond the Coulee Region’s grocery stores that carry locally-grown and produced foods, farmer’s markets are held in communities from May through October, says Hooker, co-author of “Cooking With the Seasons: A Year in My Kitchen,” (Henry Holt and Co., 1997).

“The closer you buy foods from home, the better,” Hooker says. “If the food doesn’t travel so far, it has more flavor; kids love flavorful foods.”

If you serve fresh, local foods that are tastier, your children will be more satisfied when they eat, and they will not tend to overeat, according to Hooker.

Warm up in the winter

During these winter months, Willens says, look for foods that warm the body. Oatmeal for breakfast is a good example. Along with oats, other warming grains that can be incorporated into baking and cooking include barley and buckwheat.

Baked apples topped with cinnamon provide a healthy snack, side dish, or dessert during these frigid days. Similarly, pears can be baked with nutmeg, allspice, and cloves. “Cinnamon is known to help regulate blood sugar, and is a warming spice,” Willens says.

Apples and pears, with cheese and nuts, make excellent desserts over cookies and

ice cream, Hooker says. “Look at the way the rest of the world eats—dessert is not for every day,” she says. “Make a good dessert, and make it for once a week.”

In line with warm winter meals, cook up pots of soup and stews for lunches and dinners. The comforting aromas of fragrant dishes alone often can evoke relaxation. As a time saver, bake a whole chicken in the crock pot. Accompany that with onions, garlic, carrots, and celery, which are also warming foods, Willens says. Sprinkle dishes with oregano to warm up your family even more.

To combat colds and the flu, incorporate plain yogurt containing probiotics into your family’s diet, Willens says. Chicken soup is another age-old, effective remedy for illness.

Nuts (almonds, peanuts, and walnuts) and seeds (sunflower and pumpkin) are excellent foods to add into the diet any time of the year, Willens says. Try sprinkling them on your cereal or yogurt.

Lighten up in spring, summer

In just a few months, spring will arrive. Then, it’s time to cleanse your body and lighten up your meals with seasonal foods such as asparagus, Willens says.

“Take the kids out of their comfort zone,” Hooker says. “Have them try

different foods, such as soy beans instead of green beans.”

Children can surprise you by how much they will enjoy eating a salad. Hooker suggests grating vegetables, such as carrots, into the salad. Mix it up with raisins.

To get your children to try different foods, such as more whole grain breads, take out your cookie cutters. Cut the bread into shapes and top with peanut butter.

In the summer, think about “cooling” foods to enjoy. Bring fresh strawberries, cucumbers, and watermelon to enjoy at your table. In addition, serve tropical foods, such as bananas and pineapples, Willens says.

Boost your health with the fall harvest

Start preparing your body for the winter in the fall, Willens says. A great harvest of pumpkins, squash, and other autumnal treats are readily available for your family.



When your children return to school, be sure to pay attention to their menus away from home. “Compare the school menu to what you’re serving at home,” Hooker says. “Stick the menu on your refrigerator. Look at what they’re eating at school. If they are having pizza for lunch, don’t serve it again for dinner, for example.”

Allow your children to help plan your weekly menus. Ask them what they want to eat on a particular day. “You also can pay attention to what the kids eat at restaurants, and incorporate those flavors into your cooking at home,” Hooker says. “Are they enjoying Italian or Mexican dishes? What do your children like to eat?”

However, she isn’t suggesting your house should be run like a restaurant with eight different entrees offered. “Don’t always give your children choices,” Hooker says. “Prepare one meal and that is what they are to eat.”

Recent research has consistently supported the notion that meals shared as a family build important bonds. Now, with the right choices, they can maintain your family’s health too. [CPC](#)

Kim Seidel is a writer based in Onalaska, Wis. For more information on the Farm to School program, visit the national site at farmtoschool.org, or check out Wisconsin’s projects at reapfoodgroup.org/farmtoschool.

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