It's easy in August. When western North Carolina has a tailgate market in every town, grocers have their “Appalachian Grown” signs out in force, and chefs show off their seasonal menus, eating locally farmed food is almost unavoidable.

But what about during the winter? Some of the obvious ways to eat local are gone, and a return to California spinach and Midwest feedlot beef may seem inevitable. Not so.

In fact, sticking to seasonal foods during winter is not only practical, but also smart. Modern nutrition and health studies have confirmed that our bodies thrive on what's fresh. And, it makes sense. For 99 percent of human history, there has been no globalized agriculture, no international shipping and no refrigeration. In fact, for most of human history, there's been no agriculture at all. We've eaten what's ripe and growing (or what's walking by on four hooves). It makes sense that our bodies would have adapted to seasonal rhythms, allowing us to thrive on berries and fast-growing fruiting vegetables in the warm months, storing up energy from plant roots (that are themselves storing energy) in fall, and getting by on heavier dried and stored foods in winter.

With a little more effort, a robust dose of advance planning and a freezer, anyone can keep their diet well localized straight through April. Here are four...
Overcoming a Wintering Over... continued from page 29

tips for maximizing your intake of locally grown foods right here from our southern Appalachian foodshed.

1. THINK PROTEIN

Most animal products are year-round products, and availability is growing in the mountains. You can find eggs, cheese, milk, buffalo, bison, beefalo, emu, pork, lamb, goat, beef, chicken, turkey, trout, shrimp, rabbit and quail here.

Where do you get the meat when tailgate market season ends? One way is to fill your freezer direct from the farmer; many sell quarter, half and whole animals, cut and wrapped from the butcher. If, for example, you buy a pig from Warren Wilson College Farm or Red-Tail Ridge Farm in Buncombe County, you'll get a freezer full of roasts, chops, sausage, tenderloin, ribs and more. Pork is a classic Appalachian winter food, traditionally only slaughtered in the colder months and used as not only a main protein source, but also a flavor-enhancer for low-tech winter vegetable sources like dried cutshort beans.

Beef sources include not only grass-fed beef, like that from Spring House Meats in Fairview or Foothills Family Farms based in Old Fort, but also more familiar grain-finished beef, such as from K.W. Getty’s Farm in Rutherford County or Apple Brandy Beef in North Wilkesboro.

Grocers also stock local protein. Locally farmed Sunburst Trout is a particularly ubiquitous example: it's available at Earth Fare, French Broad Food Co-op, Greenlife Grocery, Hendersonville Community Co-op, Ingles, Poppies, Trout Lily Market and beyond.

2. BE A SHARP-EYED PRODUCE SHOPPER

Demand for locally grown produce exceeds supply in winter, but there are some good sources around, even for leafy green stuff. Watch natural food stores and co-ops for greens from Candler-based Jake's Farm, one of the few local growers to supply grocers from a greenhouse straight through winter. You'll find tasty, certified organic kale, collards and more from Jake's about every month of the year. Hydroponic lettuce is a year-round treat, too. Bibb varieties are especially tender grown indoors. At Earth Fare and Ingles, you'll find Mountain Fresh Living brand lettuce from Jackson County; shop Greenlife Grocery for Madison Farms' lettuce.

Sprouts are a year-round green source (and have protein, too). Sunny Creek sprouts is an industry leader located right here in Tryon, North Carolina. They offer old favorites like alfalfa and mung bean sprouts, but also watch for their sprouted black-eyed peas around New Year's.

3. USE THE ROOT CELLAR

Don't have a dry, rat-proof underground room? Don't worry! Most people have some corner of the house, porch or storage shed that can be adapted for storing vegetables and fruits. Winter squash are a wonderful storage food. Those varieties that store well, such as
Butternut and Hubbard, gain sweet, hearty flavor as they lose moisture with each passing week. Apples do the same: an Arkansas Black is a bland rock in October, but mighty tasty come January.

“Our Slow Food chapter bought most of the crop of Goldrush apples, our favorite storage variety, from a local farm this year,” says Eve Davis, owner of the Hawk and Ivy, a Bed and Breakfast in Barnardsville, NC. Eve works hard to include locally grown foods in the breakfasts served at the Inn and is sure to think ahead and get fall foods, like potatoes, squash, apples and cornmeal, into storage to last the winter months.

Other popular foods to store include celery root, cabbage, turnips and rutabagas, onions and sweet potatoes. By hunting high and low in fall (or growing them yourself), you’ll find there are storage-friendly varieties of fruits, too, that we think of as quite perishable: melons, pears and tomatoes.

Chuck Marsh, proprietor of Useful Plants Nursery, says Asian Persimmons are one of many overlooked rare fruits that store well. “Picked from the tree through November, you can keep them around and eat them well into January.”

4. PRESERVE THE HARVEST

It won’t help you now, but certainly the best way to eat local in style all winter is to think far ahead. Some things don’t freeze well, but the freezer is a great place for berries, flat gallon bags of tomato sauce, seeded red and yellow bell peppers, sweet corn shucked from the cob, okra and parboiled greens. Canning is an art and science, but worth mastering. Feeling adventurous? Curing, drying, smoking, brining, fermenting and storing in sand are all time-honored ways of making food last. Classic resources full of information on food preservation include Janet Green’s Putting Food By and Carla Emery’s The Encyclopedia of Country Living.

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