

Sprouts: the ultimate local food?

By MARY MCCLINTOCK

Eating locally grown food reduces the "food miles" meals travel to reach my plate, but to eat REALLY local, I enjoy food that traveled not miles but just inches from where I grow it in my kitchen.

Sprouts. There are infinite possibilities of seeds to sprout and enjoy — cooked, raw, in every meal of the day. Two types of sprouts are most common — fat, long white ones (mung bean sprouts) and tiny-leaved thread-like ones (often alfalfa sprouts).

I'm exploring other sprouts and sprouting my own. Pat Leuchtman's Recorder gardening column, Between the Rows, featured sprouts on Feb. 16, including easy-to-follow directions for growing sprouts. Check out www.commonweeder.com/between/between.htm. Pat referred readers to the Sprout People Eeb site (www.sproutpeople.com) — a treasure trove of sprout information, including recipes for cooking them or enjoying them raw.

At Feb. 16's seed swap at Green Fields Market, David Lovler brought a bowl of sprouted coriander seeds. Delighted to see bright greenery on a snowy day, I tasted a sprout that was a burst of cilantro (coriander seeds come from cilantro plants). David sprouts a range of seeds, including fenugreek, wheat and lentils, and says lentils are easy for novices to grow.

Daniel Botkin of Laughing Dog Farm in Gill shared information about sprouts' nutritional values, including that broccoli sprouts are high in antioxidants, higher than the mature vegetables.

Not everyone's a sprout expert. One Greenfield resident, who will remain nameless, said she "used to think they all tasted like dirt and why eat them?" Now she likes the "little, crunchy ones."

Dave Gott of Heath often eats sprouts in salads or throws them into soup, and thinks they're great on their own tossed with oil and vinegar.

He said sprouts are great mixed with shredded carrots and cabbage or sauerkraut, but it works best to first mix the sprouts and other vegetables and then mix in mayonnaise. If you just toss sprouts with mayonnaise, you'll end up with a "big glob of goo." He uses the sprouting seed mixes sold in the bulk herb section at Green Fields Market.

If growing sprouts doesn't fit your life, you can still enjoy locally grown sprouts. Gill Greenery's sprouts are available at Green Fields Market and Foster's Super Market.

Along with "unconfused" shredded vegetable and sprout salads, I'm trying recipes from the Sprout People Web site ... sprout omelettes, sprout quesadillas, potato salad with sprouts (who says you can only eat potato salad on Fourth of July?). And I will try their sprouted bean burger recipe. How are you going to enjoy this really local food?

Got Apples? Crisp, direct-from-the-grower apples are still available. The farm stores at Apex Orchards in Shelburne (153 Peckville Road, (413) 624-3325) and Pine Hill Orchard in Colrain (248 Greenfield Road, (413) 625-2744) are open daily.

This Week I'm Eating...

Sprouted Bean Burgers

From Sprout People (www.sproutpeople.com)

- 1 c. Adzuki Sprouts
- 1 c. Lentil Sprouts
- 1/2 c. Mung Bean Sprouts
- 1/2 c. Garbanzo Sprouts (or three cups of any sprouted beans*)
- 1 t. salt & pepper
- 2 T. veg. oil
- 1/2 c. flour
- 1/4 c. milk
- 2 eggs, slightly beaten
- 2-3 scallions, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 T. fresh thyme or 1 tsp. dried thyme

Chop the Sprouts — finely, or grind in a food processor. Mix all ingredients together. Shape into thin (1/4 inch) patties. Heat pan (cast iron works very well) over medium-high heat for a minute. Add oil and heat for a minute until almost smoking. Place patties in pan. Brown lightly on each side. Notes: These freeze well. Separate un-cooked patties with wax paper and seal in a plastic bag. Freeze.

* Always use denser bean sprouts (all but long fat mung sprouts) as your main sprout — mungs alone will not work well unless they are small (2 day) sprouts.

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MARY MCCLINTOCK

A craving for Cassoulet

A warm French dish for a wintry night (just don't eat it too often!)

By JENNIFER MARGULIS
Special to the Recorder

The headwaiter at the Hôtel Restaurant du Centre et du Lauragais, Jean-François Pons, puts a steaming hot terrine of *cassoulet* on the table with a flourish. He uses the spoon to ladle thick pork sausage, duck leg and white beans onto a dinner plate.

The blisteringly hot clay dish that cooked the *cassoulet* is quite deep: there's enough of this rich, savory French stew, a specialty of this town, Castelnaudary, as well as this region around Toulouse in Southern France known as Lauragais, to feed an elephant.

The waiter turns to go. "You are required to eat it all," he says only a flicker of the outside of his lips to indicate he is smiling — French humor as dry as the red wine I have ordered to accompany the dish: a 2004 Minervois.

Cassoulet, which takes its name from the word "cassole," the traditional clay pot in which it is cooked, is a thick stew that traditionally takes at least two days and several pots and pans to make.

The ingredients and the manner of cooking it change slightly from region to region — and these small nuances are the subject of great debate (*cassoulet* is to Castelnaudary what the cheese steak is to Philadelphia ... the people of this charming town of 12,000 inhabitants on the Canal du Midi take patriotic pride in the dish).

Despite the regional differences, the principal ingredients are:

- ◆ White beans grown in the region and called "le lingot," similar to cannellini beans you can find in any American supermarket
- ◆ Thick pork sausage known as "saucisse de Toulouse" in French
- ◆ Chunks of pork or mutton
- ◆ Grated duck fat and duck meat

It may be a cliché but it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that *cassoulet* is the pride and joy of Castelnaudary.

According to Stéphanie Tonton, the head of Castelnaudary's Visitor's Bureau, the town has four *cassoulet* canning factories (unlike a Philly cheese steak, it is sold in supermarkets throughout France) that employ more than 3,000 people and, 170,000 cans are produced daily.

At the round entrance to town is a sculpture of a woman holding — what else? — a hand-made clay *cassoulet* pot, and you can't walk more than two blocks through Castelnaudary without seeing a restaurant advertising the dish or a boutique selling it by the can.

After the first bite I understand why the couple I accosted in the coffee shop earlier giggled when I asked if they eat *cassoulet* once a week. This stew is delicious, but it's as rich and almost as thick as cheesecake and, despite the tourist hype, only served up in French kitchens on special occasions or when guests come to dine.

The beans, slow-cooked in a homemade bouillon, are tender but not falling apart. The sausage is chewy and peppery. The duck isn't as gamey as duck I've tried before, and it has a pleasing, almost sweet taste that bears little resemblance to



Jennifer Margulis

A commercial oven in Castelnaudary turns out hundreds of cassoulet.

inferior fowl like chicken and turkey.

Each of the meats, explains Stéphanie Tonton, is braised separately beforehand, and then carefully layered in the pot, alternating with the beans.

The hardest part, Tonton says, is getting the *cassoulet* to be neither too watery nor too dry. But the mark of a truly gifted *cassoulet* chef is the crust: it must be nicely browned but not burned, pierced no more or less than seven times, according to tradition.

This is so hard to get just right that cooks are known to, well, cheat. "Some people put breadcrumbs on top," another waiter comes to whisper scandalously to me.

"But that's a criminal offense!" The history of the dish is as rich as the stew itself. Legend has it that *cassoulet* was first invented during a brutal winter siege of Castelnaudary during the Hundred Year War, when the English had surrounded the city and French inhabitants were starving.

They brought together their last provisions — one family had some beans, another some pork sausage — and they made their last supper, so to speak. The slow-cooked stew, a stone soup of sorts, was so nourishing that it roused the flagging French fighters who beat the English back and liberated the city. Or so the story goes.

Legend also has it that the first *cassoulet* was made with fava beans. But when Christopher Columbus returned from his travels in the New World he brought small white beans with him and presented them as a wedding gift to Catherine de Medici.

The beans were reported to produce flatulence, which was believed by the medical doctors of the time to liberate the lower abdomen and make the woman more ready to receive the man's sperm.

Although de Medici is said to have accepted the wedding present with great delight, regional farmers to whom she distributed the beans and who began cultivating them, bred the "lingot" beans, as they are called in French, to have a finer, more easily digestible skin.

Want to make *cassoulet* in your own kitchen? Despite all the lore and the fact that today it is made with great care in the finest French restaurants, *cassoulet* probably originated as a peasant dish, served up to farmers after a long day in the fields, says food historian Francine Segan, who teaches at Sarah Lawrence College.

"It wasn't a recipe written down," says Segan, "you used what was available in your larder."

To make a French *cassoulet* in an American kitchen, assemble:

- 1 cup dry white beans
- 1 med. onion, sliced
- 1 small onion, whole
- extra virgin olive oil
- 4 cloves garlic
- 4 cups vegetable stock
- 1 ham hock
- 1 carrot
- 1 celery stalk
- bay leaf
- 1 sprig of fresh thyme or dried equivalent
- 1/2 lb. pork (or chicken) garlic sausage
- 4 duck legs
- 1/4 lb. pork rind or ham hocks (Canadian bacon can be substituted)

Rinse the beans, cover generously with water, and soak overnight.

Sauté sliced onion in olive oil for three minutes, add chopped garlic and sauté until softened.

Simmer the beans with the sautéed onion and garlic until cooked but not crumbling (this can take anywhere from 45 minutes to 2 hours depending on the beans) in vegetable stock, to which you have added a ham hock, the small onion, the carrot, the celery stalk, a bay leaf and a sprig of thyme.

Remove the whole vegetables, the sprig of thyme, and the bay leaf after the beans are cooked. Add generous amounts of salt and pepper, to taste. (You can skip this entire step and use canned white beans instead but the end flavor will be much less savory.)

Sauté sausage, cut in 2" to 3" chunks in extra virgin olive oil until browned on all sides. Remove from the pan, reserving the oil.

Sauté duck legs in the same pan. You may find them packaged in confit, which is even better. If you cannot find duck legs, substitute smoked turkey legs instead.

Sauté pork rind or ham hocks, cut in chunks, until brown (you can use Canadian bacon here instead of, or in addition to, the ham).

In a clay pot or other ovenproof vessel, layer the beans and the meat, adding soup stock as needed.

Bake for two hours, checking that it does not get too dry, or as needed, in an oven set at 300.

Break the top with a fork as the *cassoulet* cooks.

The crust should be nicely browned but not burned.



Jennifer Margulis

The headwaiter at the Hôtel Restaurant du Centre et du Lauragais, Jean-François Pons, serves a cassoulet with the warning, "You are required to eat it all!"

Indian pudding ... an oldie but goodie

Culinary Institute of America

One of the most beloved traditional Yankee recipes is Indian pudding. While not widely known beyond the borders of New England, this early American dish is still celebrated in diners, restaurants, and inns throughout the northeast. The simple recipe has changed little since colonial days.

John Quincy Adams once said, "Patience and perseverance have a magical effect." So it is for Indian pudding lovers — patience is the virtue that yields the creamiest pudding. Cooked too quickly, the eggs will scramble and the pudding will be lumpy.

"To prevent lumps, gently sprinkle the corn meal directly over the whisk and whisk vigorously until it is com-

pletely blended," suggests Dan Turgeon, professor in Culinary Arts at The Culinary Institute of America. "Stir about once a minute to prevent the bottom from scorching or sticking to the pot."

Indian Pudding Makes 8 servings

- 4 cups milk
- 1/2 cup cornmeal
- 2/3 cups molasses
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 1/4 teaspoon each of ground ginger, nutmeg and cinnamon

Preheat oven to 275 degrees F. Butter a soufflé dish or pudding mold. Bring a kettle of water to a boil to make a hot water bath for steaming

the pudding.

1. Bring the milk to a boil in a saucepan over medium heat. Add the cornmeal gradually, whisking constantly. Simmer over low heat, stirring constantly, until the mixture has thickened, about 5-10 minutes.

2. Remove the pan from the heat, and stir in the molasses. Allow it to cool slightly for about 5 minutes and then stir in the eggs and spices.

3. Pour this batter into a prepared dish and set it in a larger baking dish. Place the assembly on a rack in a preheated oven. Add enough boiling water to come up to the level of the pudding.

4. Bake for about two hours or until the pudding is firmly set. Allow the pudding to rest for 30 min. Serve while still warm.

This pudding is creamy and satis-



CIA/Keith Ferris

A bowl of Indian Pudding is great way to warm up this winter.

fying as is, but it would be nice to serve a sauce made by simmering apple cider, raisins, and a little brown sugar. Other excellent accompaniments include whipped cream, or vanilla ice cream.