The Local Christmas Dinner

As you plan the upcoming meals for Christmas, consider planning your menu around locally produced ingredients. By doing so, you’ll delight your family with food that is robust with natural flavors, will reduce your impact on the planet and will keep your food dollars circulating locally.

A food dollar spent locally generates twice as much income for the local economy. When businesses are not owned locally, money leaves the community at every transaction. This does not mean you need to bypass your local grocer; many locally owned stores are avid supporters of local producers.

Many of the common holiday food staples are easily sourced locally. The foundation of most meals begins with a protein source, and turkey may be the most common protein source over the holidays. Since Minnesota leads the country in turkey production, getting locally produced turkey should not be difficult. Turkeys can be divided into three groups, conventionally produced in barns, heritage breeds grown in free-range conditions and wild turkeys, which are truly free range. It’s tough to beat turkey at Christmas.

Pork, ham especially, is another excellent protein choice that can be sourced locally. Minnesota is the third largest producer of pork, and so finding local pork should be easy as well. Lamb may not be traditional Christmas fare, but is certainly another excellent choice, while beef may have become everyday fare; it’s another good choice and easy to source locally.

If Lutefisk is your protein of choice for the Christmas dinner -- and you want to keep a local theme -- let me offer another option, mock lutefisk. The first step in this culinary treat is to find neighbor that likes ice fishing, preferably spearing. You have species options, but my recommendation would be a nice fat northern pike. If you don’t know anyone that can catch fish for you, simply call Donnie, the most famous local fisherman in our small community. Donnie sets the standard on local fishing (and stories) and to merely say he’s excellent fisherman would be like saying the Pope is sort of religious. In fact, he’s is the only guy I know that has so many fish houses, on so many lakes, he has to hire underemployed extension agents during the winter fishing season.

Once you have your northern pike in hand, carefully fillet it the normal fashion taking extra care to keep it clean. Next, hide it behind the woodstove until the pets will no longer come into the house and your wife is searching the phone listings for cadaver dogs. At this point, don a Tyvek disposable hazmat suit and an OSHA approved X300 hazardous waste respirator and rewrap your fillets in clean cheesecloth and allow them to marinate in the lower level of the outhouse for another 48 hours, longer if the fillets are more than six pounds. Once marinated, rinse the fillets, season and bake at 350 until flaky – be careful to not overcook, which can ruin lutefisk. Before serving, season with sea salt and plenty of melted butter and your family will be amazed how mock lutefisk has the same robust, unique flavor as the real stuff sent here from thankful Norwegian fish exporters.

Moving around the plate, the choice of starch is typically the potato, which is another easy one. Minnesota tips the scales at number 7 in potato production, so whether mashed or baked, these are starchy tubers are easy to find. Wild rice is another great option. Minnesota typically produces about
half of the domestic production of wild rice, so it’s easy to find locally. If sweet potatoes are typically on the menu, they can be sourced locally if you’re a professional gardener, or has a generous one living nearby. If not, this carotene rich colorful vegetable can be substituted with local squash.

Winter squash and sweet potatoes are two nutritional powerhouses that are similar in many aspects. Both are off the charts in vitamin A so it’s easy to see why they’re both champs in the food pyramid. Both are rich in calcium, magnesium, potassium, and vitamins B6 and E, not to mention fiber and protein. These two colorful vegetables are also rich in vitamin C and offer delicious additions to the Christmas dinner plate.

The veggies are a no-brainer. If you garden, and preserve them by canning or freezing, you choices are many. If you don’t put by your own garden veggies, corn, green beans and peas are common processing crops in Minnesota and easy to source locally.

If you like the idea of keeping your meal as local as possible, there’s help. The University of Minnesota Northwest Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnership has made it easy for you. They have produced a website called Local Foods Partnership (localfoods.umn.edu) to help you source local foods. The website lists producers, processors and farmer’s markets near you. You can search the website to find a grower near you or you can search for a specific product to see who produces it.

So as you plan your upcoming feasts, take a moment to stop and think about where the food is grown. Ask your local grower if they are willing to provide locally grown food. In my experience, most grocers are happy to provide what their customers request. Indeed, this creates is a clear “win-win” situation because it keeps those food dollars in our local communities and provides fresher, tastier, healthier food for you and your family.

For more information on sourcing local foods or additional mock lutefisk recipes, contact me at 800-450-2465 or stordahl@umn.edu. For help finding that big fish, call Donnie at 800-BIG-FISH.