

# Seasonal Foods: A New Menu for Public Health

“Serving healthy and sustainably grown food is as essential to the health of our community as the medical care we provide.”

—Stobhan McNally, MD  
Pediatrician, Berkshire Medical Center

The food served in health care facilities can have a significant impact on the health of patients, staff and visitors. Hospitals also play an important leadership role in modeling food choices for human and environmental health.

## The Global Food Basket

Over the last sixty years, technological developments in long distance transport, shipping, and refrigeration have led to consumer expectations that are not aligned with human and environmental health. This globalized food system allows us to buy whatever we desire whenever we want. This model of abundance has transformed menu planning and food preparation such that cooks and meal planners create menus regardless of the local growing seasons with foods that would have been unimaginable only decades ago. The average distance food travels from farm to supermarket is approximately 1,500 miles. In the last several decades, since fuel was relatively cheap and government policies promoted international trade, new methods in processing, packaging and refrigeration resulted in efficient transportation of cheap food from around the globe. However, these expanded food choices are accompanied by a variety of unconsidered human and environmental health consequences. These include a multitude of inexpensive nutritionally-empty, calorie-dense foods; policies for international trade that devastate small and midscale farm economies; chemical-dependent agriculture; and

an energy-intensive food system which contributes to global warming and pollution. Through seasonal menu planning and informed meal preparation, health care professionals can minimize the negative health and ecological impacts of food choices, while creating diverse healthy meals that are flavorful, fresh and nutritious.

## Role of Health Care

Health care is a leading sector of the economy and has the power to create market-based change. Through their purchasing power health care facilities can influence how and where their food is purchased. By demanding seasonal, local produce hospitals and hospital systems can create the market demand that will support a healthy food system. By purchasing more local, seasonal foods, health care can influence how our food is grown, distributed, processed, and transported and can support human and ecological health.

## Seasonal Foods and Menus

Seasonal foods are local foods harvested in season and are defined by regional growing conditions. Seasonal foods vary with latitude, climate, topography and other related factors. A strawberry grown and harvested in Washington in June and July can be harvested year

### Seasonal Produce: What is in season near you?

State listings of what is locally grown:

[www.sustainabletable.org/shop/eatseasonal](http://www.sustainabletable.org/shop/eatseasonal)

Find Farms in your area:

[www.foodroutes.org/localfood](http://www.foodroutes.org/localfood)

List of what is in season in your area:

[www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org)

## Tips to Serving Local Food on Your Menu

**Start Small.** During the growing season, substitute produce that you already serve with the same product from local farms.

**Work through your existing distributors.** Ask if they offer any local products and encourage them to do so.

**Learn about local farms.** Tour farms and invite farmers to your facility.

**Be Patient.** Buying local can be rewarding yet challenging at first. Be flexible and set realistic expectations and goals.

**Advertise.** Share with your customers what you are doing by labeling foods that come from local farms and tell stories about the food and the farmers.

*Glynwood: A Guide to Serving Local Food on Your Menu* [www.glynwood.org](http://www.glynwood.org)

round in California. They also include crops that lend themselves to cold storage, such as potatoes, apples, and winter squash. Consequently, there is no single national or international list of seasonal foods for large countries such as the United States or Canada.

- Seasonal menus are menus developed using predominantly local, seasonal foods. It requires thoughtful and creative planning to use predominantly in-season foods, or those that come from the closest possible growing region. However, this does not mean you must avoid all non-local foods in your meal planning. By incorporating seasonal foods, we can eat food that is fresher, tastier and may allow for a better understanding of quality and safety. Local, seasonal ingredients can give both nutritional and environmental benefits. Because seasonal produce is by definition local, it does not travel as far, it is fresher and causes less pollution during transport. Moreover, it can help support the socio-economic health of local economies.

## Seasonal Food and Health

### 1. Taste and freshness increases consumption of fruits and vegetables

An ongoing challenge for the food-service professional is how to encourage patients, employees and visitors to eat more fruits and vegetables as a part of healthy diet. According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), 64% of Americans do not eat the recommended amount of vegetables daily while 80% do not eat the recommended amounts of fruits daily.<sup>1</sup>

We all have memories of eating a tomato in the summertime that is juicy, ripe and bursting with flavor. We have access to tomatoes in the winter, yet they lack the flavor. Why is this? Most fruit and vegetable varieties are selected to withstand extended travel and storage, be a consistent size and shape for convenience of packaging and harvest often at the expense of nutrient content and flavor. Fruit and vegetables can spend up to 7-14 days in transit before arriving in your cafeteria. Locally grown seasonal fruits and vegetables are usually sold 24-48 hours after being harvested.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last several years there has been a new found excitement and support for farmers markets across the continent. Many consumers are surprised and excited by the wide varieties of tomatoes, beans, and other fruit and vegetables unavailable to them in their local supermarket. Many of the local farmers operate outside the global food system and are able to select and grow varieties of crops for their taste and flavor. In contrast, to minimize transaction costs the industrial global food system minimizes the specific varieties of fruit and vegetables it purchases and distributes. While this system will provide us with one or two varieties of a specific fruit or vegetable throughout the year that is the only variety it will provide regardless of what other varieties of bean may be more flavorful or nutritious.

Produce that is picked and eaten locally at the height of their ripeness has exceptional flavor and when handled properly, has maintained its maximum nutrients. We know that if fresh food tastes good, people will eat it. Providing local, seasonal foods can encourage increased consumption of fruits and vegetables because the fresher and more flavorful, the more we eat, as long as it is accessible and affordable. Moreover, supporting local farmers can help provide a greater diversity of flavorful and nutritious foods.

### 2. Food Safety

Food service professionals and consumers alike are concerned about food safety. No matter where our food is grown we want to make sure that producers are following safe and clean production practices. All foods, whether provided from local farmers or from a farmer on the other side of our country must meet similar food safety production standards. However, should a food safety issue occur a localized, decentralized food system is far more able to contain the concern and thus provides a valuable safety net relative to centralized supply chains.

### 3. Competitive Prices

Buying produce in season, such as carrots, potatoes, apples and berries that are abundant in your region are likely to be cost competitive or less expensive than food sourced with the conventional system. Growers Collaborative, LLC, who sources local California produce compared 15 products with a California distributor and found that sourcing local seasonal produce cost less than produce transported from around the country or globally. Cooley Dickenson Hospital in Massachusetts found that sourcing from a local growing collaborative saved them money on their local produce contracts.

### 4. Food Miles, Global Warming and Health

“Food miles” refers to the average distance food travels from farm to table, and is used as a greenhouse gas emissions indicator. A study by researchers at the University of Iowa found that the average food miles for locally grown produce to reach the institutional market was 56 miles compared to 1,949 for conventional produce.<sup>3</sup> The type of transportation plays an important role in the impact of food miles. Because air travel uses significantly more fuel per weight transported, it has the most significant impact. Research is also demonstrating the important role of packaging and refrigeration in the contribution to food related climate change impacts. Buying seasonal, local foods can be an important step in reducing a hospital’s climate change footprint caused by transportation and long distance refrigeration. The long-term

## Better Hospital Food: Seasonal Recipes

As a part of a comprehensive program to improve hospital food, the National Health Services (NHS), London UK brought together a team of leading chefs to develop a database of over 300 recipes that includes recipes based on seasonal local ingredients.

*Better Hospital Foods: Seasonal Recipes*  
[195.92.246.148/nhsestates/better\\_hospital\\_food/bhf\\_content/recipes/overview.asp](http://195.92.246.148/nhsestates/better_hospital_food/bhf_content/recipes/overview.asp)

solution is to create a food system that is more energy efficient while claiming a larger market for local seasonal foods.

### 5. Support Local Community

Purchasing seasonal, local foods from local farms strengthens the capacity and viability of these farms and supports the economic vitality of the local community and region. A variety of studies from Iowa, Minnesota and Hawaii have demonstrated that supporting local food systems improves the local economy. For more information, visit the Crossroad Resource Center at [www.crcworks.org](http://www.crcworks.org). Woodbury County Iowa has passed a preferential purchasing policy for locally sourced produce. Hospitals can play a vital role in supporting the social and economic fabric of communities through support of local food systems.

### Creating Seasonal Menus

Facilities making the transition to seasonal menus should not get concerned about how quickly they can make the transition. For many, it is a process of transition and learning. What is important is to take manageable steps.

For example:

- Develop a top ten list of foods you can easily replace with local, seasonal alternatives.
- Educate your staff about seasonal food in your hospital newsletter.
- Designate one meal a week or month that will highlight local seasonal foods as a pilot.
- Consider reducing and eliminating air freighted produce first. Typically, these are foods that are rapidly perishable such as leafy greens or berries obviously not in season.
- Ask your distributors to label where their food is grown, so you can select produce that is locally or regionally grown.
- Provide signs in your cafeteria highlighting the local farms and why local seasonal is important.
- Use seasonal menus as a marketing tool to capture the current trend of local foods through newsletters, menus, and educational materials to patients.

### Conclusions

Health care professionals have the opportunity to be leaders in promoting a healthy food system by understanding how our health and the health of our environment is related to how our food is grown, distributed and processed. Buying local, seasonal foods provide the opportunity for hospitals and hospital systems to build food systems that have public health as its focus.

### Food Miles Comparison

Produce Type	Locally Grown	Not Locally Grown
Apples	61	1,726
Broccoli	20	1,846
Lettuce	43	1,823
Tomatoes	60	1,569

Pirog & Benjamin, 2003

## Example Harvest Calendar: New York State

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Asparagus					●	●						
Apples	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲		●	●	●	●		
Blueberries							●	●	●	●		
Broccoli					●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Carrots	▲	▲	▲	▲			●	●	●	●	●	●
Cucumbers								●	●	●		
Eggplant								●	●	●		
Lettuce							●	●	●	●		
Peaches							●	●				
Potatoes	▲	▲	▲	▲			●	●	●	●	▲	▲
Radishes					●	●	●	●	●	●		
Squash, Summer						●	●	●	●	●		
Squash, Winter	▲	▲	▲					●	●	●	●	●
Strawberries						●						
Tomatoes							●	●	●			



Storage Period



Harvest Season

New York Harvest Calendar: <http://www.agmkt.state.ny.us/HarvestCalendar.html>  
 Refer to <http://www.sustainabletable.org/shop/eatseasonal> for your state's specific harvest calendar.

## RESOURCES

Healthy Food in Health Care: [www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org](http://www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org)

Glynwood: [www.glynwood.org/resource/guidelocalmenu.pdf](http://www.glynwood.org/resource/guidelocalmenu.pdf)

A guide to serving local food on your menu

Better Hospital Food: [195.92.246.148/nhsestates/better\\_hospital\\_food/bhf\\_content/recipes/overview.asp](http://195.92.246.148/nhsestates/better_hospital_food/bhf_content/recipes/overview.asp)  
 Seasonal Recipes

Sustainable Food & Policy Project: [www.foodalliance.org/sustainablefoodpolicy/index.html](http://www.foodalliance.org/sustainablefoodpolicy/index.html)  
 Sample Food Policies

Organic Food Production Talking Points: [www.HENdpg.org](http://www.HENdpg.org)

Crossroads Resource Center: [www.crcworks.org/rural.html](http://www.crcworks.org/rural.html)  
 Tools for Community Self Determination, Farm & Food Economies, Rural Economic Studies,  
 Find Food in Farm Country Studies

## ENDNOTES

1. Economic Research Service (ERS). 2006. "Diet and Health Data: Food Consumption and Nutrient Intake Tables." Retrieved April 18, 2007 from: [www.ers.usda.gov/Brizefing/DietAndHealth/data/foods/table4.htm](http://www.ers.usda.gov/Brizefing/DietAndHealth/data/foods/table4.htm)
2. Pirog, Rich, Timothy Van Pelt, Kamyar Enshayan, and Ellen Cook. "Food, Fuel and Freeways: An Iowa Perspective on How Far Food travels, Fuel Usage, and Greenhouse Gas Emissions." Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Retrieved May 3, 2007 from: [www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubs/staff/ppp/food\\_mil.pdf](http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubs/staff/ppp/food_mil.pdf)
3. Pirog, Rich, and Andrew Benjamin. "Checking the Food Odometer: Comparing Food Miles for Local Versus Conventional Produce Sales in Iowa Institutions." Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, July 2003.

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