



# The joy of local foods and banana pancakes

Recently, I finished listening to a food memoir. “Animal, Vegetable, Miracle,” by Barbara Kingsolver is a look at how one family (Kingsolver’s family, that is) made a commitment to eat only local food (with a few small exceptions) for one year. Much of their food they grew themselves, but what they couldn’t grow they bought from local farms.

For some reading this, that idea of eating food you grow and food grown within a reasonable distance of your home falls more into the category of “normal, everyday life,” than “something to write a

book about.” And if that’s the case, that’s awesome.

But it’s not like that everywhere, or for everyone.

Hearing their experience — from cutting the first stalks of asparagus in the spring to canning tomatoes in late summer to eating from the freezer in the dark days of winter — reminded me of years past when I put up jar after jar of pickles, to-



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mato sauce, salsa and relish. And it made me look forward to planting a small container garden on our back porch again this summer.

Last summer, my daughter, Paige, now 8, and I planted tomatoes, basil, rosemary, thyme and parsley. Some of the plants thrived, while others produced only a single mealy tomato.

We’ve already decided to focus our efforts this summer on sun gold tomatoes, a favorite of ours for snacking. And perhaps a cucumber plant — though we haven’t yet agreed on variety.

My son, Will, who’s 10, wants

me to plant pickling cucumbers so I can make pickles this summer. Paige, whose love for cucumbers is vast, wants a bigger variety she can snack on.

Who knows. Maybe we’ll plant both.

In the meantime, while we wait for the weather to warm and the last frost to pass, we have so much opportunity to buy delicious local foods here. This past weekend, I made a trip to the winter Bangor Farmers’ Market, held from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. the first and third Sundays through the end of April at Sea Dog Brewing Co.

It was my first time there. I’ve

intended to go ever since I heard about it nearly two years ago, but just hadn’t. Walking in, and seeing so many farms with their familiar signs and tables overflowing with produce, cheeses, breads and more, was like coming home. Before long, my reusable bag was heavy with purchases.

This visit netted me eggs, locally grown and milled rye flour, ground beef, apple cider, carrots, bread and yogurt. I could have, if we needed it, also stocked up on frozen blueberries, tea, milk, cheese, onions, beets and more. There’s so much fresh, local food

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Stefani Berkey (left) demonstrates how to hollow out potatoes during a plant-based cooking class at Tiller & Rye in Brewer recently.

## Food fundamentals

### Tiller & Rye offers plant-based cooking classes with ‘Chef Stef’

BY SHELBY HARTIN  
BDN STAFF

At Tiller & Rye in Brewer, almost 20 people were seated in front of Stefani Berkey’s cooking station, waiting for their lesson to begin, on a recent Tuesday night. Scattered around Berkey was a rainbow of plant-based ingredients: potatoes, garbanzo beans, peppers, lemons and more.

Berkey, also known as “Chef Stef,” hosts a class once per month at Tiller & Rye, a grocery store featuring products made in Maine and an array of dietary-conscious offerings, such as gluten-free products and meat and dairy alternatives.

Berkey began teaching cook-

ing classes at Tiller & Rye last October and shows attendees how to use plant-based ingredients to make a variety of dishes. That evening, she covered three recipes: hummus-stuffed small potatoes, black bean and corn salad, and pasta with lentil spinach marinara sauce.

Berkey has always loved to cook. She studied at Le Cordon Bleu London and has worked in restaurants and hotels all over the country, refining her skills and cultivating a love of food. She moved to Maine 30 years ago and now teaches cooking classes while also running a business, The Advertising Specialists of Maine in Bangor.

A few years ago she was told that she was in danger of having a heart attack unless she started



Stefani Berkey squeezes a lemon into garbanzo beans to make a hummus during a plant-based cooking class at Tiller & Rye.

taking medications. Her response was simple and direct. “No way,” she recalled saying.

“Two and a half years ago I started eating plant-based foods only,” Berkey said. There’s no

meat in her diet and no dairy. She doesn’t eat processed foods such as oils or sugars. And she couldn’t be happier.

Her cholesterol went down. Her overall numbers are still

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## 10 things I’ve learned about myself while cooking for 1

For dinner the other night, I had two slices of artisan bread with slices of Parmesan cheese melted on them, black grapes, chocolate Chex dry out of the box, and orange juice. I thought about adding a raw carrot, but I was playing Words with Friends and chatting with a friend on Facebook and didn’t want to be bothered.

That is not an atypical scenario. I often don’t feel like cooking for myself, so I graze — and not always on the healthiest combination. I don’t have chips and junk food like that in the house, but I also don’t eat balanced calorie-controlled “meals” when I graze.

Don’t get me wrong. I love to cook and bake,



JULIE HARRIS



Meatloaf muffins are a delicious meal for one. They cook quickly and freeze well.

JULIE HARRIS | BDN

but cooking for one is no picnic. I can end up eating a dish for days on end, or freeze part of it and forget it’s in the freezer, or eventually throw out food, which I hate to do. Not all of my favorite recipes lend themselves to being cut down or frozen.

My husband, Jim, who died of pancreatic cancer in December 2010, loved to try different foods, and eventually he developed a love for cooking, too. We would have big discussions about food, ways to change recipes and tips he

saw on one of the many food shows he loved to watch on TV. We thoroughly enjoyed this aspect of our life together.

But those days have become pleasant, albeit sometimes painful, memories and now meals are another necessary chore. As you know, I like to have a Plan B, but I’m struggling with this one.

Regardless, here are some things I have learned from trying to cook for one:

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## A black bean soup recipe that can’t fail

Normally, a recipe for soup would seem to be superfluous to me. But not long ago, when I said I never used a recipe for soup, one of my pals rolled her eyes and said, “Of course, you don’t,” which was the reminder I needed that if a person isn’t accustomed to making soup, then maybe a little hand-holding through the soup process might be a good idea.



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TASTE BUDS

A good opportunity came up when I was sifting through the enormous collection of recipes people have sent me over the past few years, and I bumped into a black soup in a yummy collection of Tex-Mex flavored recipes Josephine Belknap sent me years ago. As it happens, I grow black beans, and had some I wanted to use up. And the recipe, copied from a magazine article perhaps, had a little note scrawled on it, “Debby’s recipe — delicious.” That’s good enough an endorsement for me.

The ingredients for this soup could not be more straightforward, easily found in any grocery store, and may even be things you already have around the house. You can finish the job in an hour, but don’t have to pay attention to it every minute.

Let’s talk about beans first. A 15-ounce can of black beans is useful, not just for soup, but to sprinkle over salads; to mix with corn kernels and chopped red peppers for a black bean salad dressed with vinaigrette; to mash up with onions sautéed in vegetable oil as a filling for tacos. As convenience foods go, a can of beans is really handy. Do drain and rinse them because usually the liquid is wicked salty. Better to add salt to taste after the fact.

If you want to use dried beans soaked overnight, by all means go for it. It is cheaper, for sure. To arrive at the two cups or so that a can contains, soak three-quarters cup to one cup of dried beans overnight, then boil them until tender.

Chicken broth is another handy item to keep in your kitchen cupboard. It comes canned and in aseptic packaging. You can also buy it in paste form or in bouillon cubes and add water. But if you ever, ever roast a whole chicken (or even buy a ready-made roasted chicken) it is also really easy to make your own broth.

When you have eaten all the meat from the chicken that you can get off it, put the bones (and giblets, which you ought to keep), in a deep pot and nearly cover it with water. Add a chopped onion, carrot, rib of celery and a bay leaf, and simmer it gently until the bones fall apart. Strain it, let it sit until the fat rises, which you skim off. Toss the bones and the by-now overdone vegetables. Consider cooking broth down to half the quantity in the pot; you can always add water later. The best broths will turn into a jelly when cold. Pour your broth into plastic containers to store in the freezer. I use old pint-sized sour cream or cottage cheese containers or quart-sized yogurt containers because that is one way to pre-measure it.

In the following recipe, the usual process for making almost any soup is gradually revealed: In

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