

More than one way to eat locally, year-round

By RICHIE DAVIS Recorder Staff

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GREENFIELD -- The town's first-ever Winter Fare offered more than just a farmers market with a winter twist. One workshop, on how to make "fruit leather" easily, was among a host of demonstrations offered at the event.

Leela Whitcomb-Hewitt said she began making the dried product using the surfeit of fruit from her family's "Funny Farm" in Whately -- running it through a blender, and then drying it out in a dehydrator.

Preferring blends, she's made raspberry-peach, pear-peach, plum-peach-pear strips, blending the fruit to "a pourable consistency" and then pouring the puree onto sheets. One strip she's made boasted the sweet taste of watermelon.

"I think it's exciting for people. It's super-simple to make," said Whitcomb-Hewitt, who makes the strips just to keep around the house.

"When there's an abundance around, you can use more of the fruit than you can eat fresh," she said. "Then it's still here in the winter."

And there were other offerings at the fare that gave passersby tips on how to preserve their fresh produce.

Ellie Kastanopoulos of Turners Falls, who had a table showing some of the foods she "puts up" for the winter, said she learned to can about 30 years ago, when she moved to Maine and was avidly preserving venison, mussels, mushrooms, fish and whatever she could find.

It wasn't until a couple of years ago that she decided to rekindle the habit as way to improve her diet with vegetables from the Turners Falls Farmers Market. She bought up tomatoes, zucchini, corn and other produce, which she cooked up as a large pot of minestrone to can.

"I'd go home in the winter, pop that jar of minestrone, and it smelled like summer. That was so wonderful, that this spring I said, 'I want to do better,' so I just decided to play at it," said the 57-year-old woman. She bought enough asparagus in the spring to can seven quarts of pickled asparagus, using a recipe she found online.

"This year, I want to do a whole lot more," she said.

The big hurdles, she found, are getting past the notion of buying 10 pounds of asparagus at a time, and managing time to deal with that much produce and canning at once.

Kastanopoulos stores the jars in the cupboards of her apartment, keeps frozen berries and fruit, has a freezer that she shares with four friends and has bags of onions, carrots and potatoes in a cold room.

"Time is the trick," she said. "It doesn't take that long to blanch and freeze 10 pounds of green beans, or to can them. Why was I shocked that it wasn't the burden that I imagined it to be?"

The hope of the Winter Fare, which her friend, Juanita Nelson of Deerfield, conceived of and organized along with Ferdene Chin-Yee of Riverland Farm in Whately, is to have a winter market "to see all the possibilities of things available at this time of year, and have a week about encouraging people to make meals out of these foods and invite others to eat a meal out of all this local stuff, to share that sense of doing that together."

Margaret Christie, interim executive director at Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture, which was a Winter Fare sponsor, said "consumers are ripe to begin taking the next steps" to support local agriculture year-round, as CISA begins looking at the demand by institutional buyers and large retailers for winter vegetables.

In addition to looking into how much winter storage there is for crops and what the market is for them, Christie said, there also needs to be work "to educate and inspire people."

"We'd like to be doing more to both educate and inspire people about the possibilities of more local, year-round eating. But it's important to remember that people don't have to go whole hog. You can say, 'I'd like to store some butternut squash under the bed this winter and make sure I'm eating squash once a week, and then start collecting a variety of squash recipes.'

"You can start with what seems easy and appealing."

With help from Enterprise Farm's recently opened year-round market in Whately and efforts like the Winter Fare itself, Christie said the interest of people in eating more locally can overcome the hurdle of getting past some of the winter eating blahs.

"I do think there's potential for people to find that, just the way they welcome strawberry season or sweet corn season when it comes around, that they get excited that it's fall and it's time to eat potatoes and cheeses and squashes.