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February 2011: Eating in Season—Rx for Winter Blues

In winter, what does it mean to eat in season? At this the dormant time of year when plants are at rest, consolidating their energy for the expansive growth season ahead, it seems that nature leaves little to sustain us. So it may sound silly to think of eating in season. Yet, deep in winter's bare-shelved food pantry, I believe there is a valuable and intended message.

You probably recall that all foods represent one of the three macronutrients—proteins, carbohydrates, fats, or combinations thereof. In the past, when winter provided no fresh sources of carbohydrate-rich foods, cultures relied in the cold months more heavily on good quality fats. Today, of course, with the convenience of commercial transport and supermarket shopping, we easily override winter's constraints with foods from around the world associated with almost any season. It is true that global out-of-season foods can, indeed, be a blessing by supplying nutrients and variety we would not otherwise have. But, if over-consumed they can crowd out healthy fats and disconnect us from the normal seasonal rotation that would naturally place fats in a relatively more important place in our winter diet.

Many clues point to the idea that to eat seasonally in winter means to eat relatively more fats. Good quality fats fit winter. Traditional fats and oils are perfectly designed as lubricating agents for the body during cold, dry days; and, as concentrated calories, they provide quick-burning heat energy to buffer the bitter chill. They also supply fat soluble vitamins, particularly vitamin D, to fill in the sunshine gap and to act as an antidote to winter blues.

If we doubt the wisdom of fats in winter, look at nature's planned progression of foods offered to us through the growing season: Following winter, bitter greens with their cleansing power arrive in spring to clear our systems of the rich protein/fat meals consumed over the frigid, cold months. Bitter greens are followed in summer by expansive, high-water content, quite perishable fruits and vegetables like zucchini, corn, and tomatoes that are meant for timely consumption. Fall harvest vegetables such as roots and tubers, in contrast, are generally more concentrated, contractive, durable and sustaining (See *Seasonal Harmony*, September, 2010).

Eating in Season--With the Life Cycle.
Beyond the seasonal calendar, there is a second way to think of eating seasonally, which is defined by the life cycle. While good fats and oils are important at any age for neurological and proper cellular function, hormone balance, fertility (see bullets, below), a generous portion is especially called for as we age and journey into the "winter" season of life.

A quick way to think of this is captured by Ayurveda theory, which draws parallels between the seasons and the life span http://pathways4health.org/2011/01/10/ayurveda-energy-the-life-cycle/. Ayurveda healers define Spring, from birth to age 15, as the growth years; Summer, from 15-55 years, as the time of productive activity; and, Winter, from 55 and beyond, as the time of wisdom but also when the body tends to dry out and requires extra hydrating fats and oils. As we age, we need adequate amounts of

traditional fats and oils to lubricate the system and cushion the aging process, to moisten skin and smooth wrinkles, and most importantly, to provide adequate nourishment for the brain.

The brain is largely composed of saturated fats. A healthy mix of traditional saturated fats and essential fatty acids (EFAs) are needed for the building of healthy cell membranes and proper cell function. EFAs are required for neurological and inter-cellular communication. Consuming saturated fats with a generous complement of EFAs is a valuable strategy for the prevention of Alzheimer's and dementia. The "good fats" also elevate mood, sharpen focus, and work to prevent depression and anxiety.

Discriminating Fats.

"Bad fats and oils will destroy your health faster than sugar. They cause more problems than any other class of food." …Paul Pitchford

Fats have a bad name, and perhaps this reputation is deserved based on the amount of pro-inflammatory refined vegetable oils that compose the majority of fats consumed by Americans today. Yes, fats are "bad" if by fats we mean the refined vegetable oils that are hidden in so many of the packaged and processed foods that we often, with little thought, rely upon. These hardly resemble the health-promoting fats enjoyed by cultures in the past.

When thinking about fats, it pays to be discriminating. Traditional fats are vital to health. Life cannot be sustained without them. *Good* fats and oils:

- Provide heat and energy and cushion organs;
- Help us assimilate the fat-soluble vitamins, A, D, E, and K, and a variety of minerals including magnesium and calcium;
- Are vital to proper brain function (the brain is 60% fat), mood and nerve regulation;
- Are the building block of hormones, which are key for strong bones and general health;
- Satisfy hunger and boost metabolism to support weight loss; AND
- Are vital to give the body the right materials to build healthy cell membranes, which are made of fats. Cell membranes need to be "smart" to monitor traffic in and out of the cell, just as the lining of the digestive tract screens and prevents toxic materials from entering the blood stream.

> *"…our balance of omega-6 to omega-3 affects our health as much as any other aspect of dietary fat…Because the ratio of omega-6s to omega-3s helps determine the flexibility of cell membranes, nearly all chemical communication throughout the body depends at least in part on the correct balance between omega-6s and omega-3s. Within this context, it is difficult to imagine any health problem that isn't partly related to the ratio of omega-6 to omega-3."*[1]
>
> *…Elson Haas*

[1] *Staying Healthy With Nutrition*.

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What is meant by "traditional fats?" Butter from grass-fed cows is one example. In contrast to butter from commercially-raised animals with a 9:1 omega-6/-3 ratio, butter from grass-fed cows contains an ideal 1:1 ratio of omega-6s to omega-3s. The following link offers a graphic picture of this relationship. http://pathways4health.org/2011/01/10/the-ideal-omega-3-6-balance-in-grass-fed-animal-products/. Other examples of traditional fats include nutrient-dense animal fats from pastured animals; extra virgin olive oil; unrefined, extra virgin coconut oil; and, fish oils and cod liver oil from reputable providers.

Over the past century, particularly with the population shift from farm to city and with the growth of the processed food industry, Americans have experienced a rather complete "oil change." Per capita, we have tripled in the last 100 years our consumption of fats, with the entire increase attributable to commercially-manipulated, denatured, pro-inflammatory vegetable oils.[2] *We consume 25 times (!) the refined vegetable oils of a century ago, and less than a third the amount of butter.* Much of this shift is unconscious and unnoticed: it reflects the changing American lifestyle away from home cooking to our modern reliance upon processed and packaged food products that are laden with refined vegetable oils. In the early post-war years, the food industry replaced expensive butter and coconut oil with inexpensive vegetable oils that do not go rancid and therefore offer a long shelf-life for processed and packaged foods.

Rx for Winter—Quality Fats for Depression and Mental Focus

Traditional cultures used a variety of natural strategies to cope with winter. During the dark, cold months, they intuitively relied upon cod liver oil, which they consumed in modest quantities, anchored by generous amounts of butter and other saturated fats from grass-fed animals. Modern science now confirms this intuitive wisdom: the highly fragile 5- and 6- double bond EPA and DHA fatty acids in cod liver oil require sufficient saturated fats like butter to be properly and effectively utilized by the body.

Throughout most of the last century, we moved away from many of the natural antidotes to winter—cod liver oil, butter from grass-fed animals, eggs from barnyard hens, milk and other animal products from grass-fed animals, and bone stocks—the foods that maintain a sense of health and well-being through the dark winter months. In 1927, for example, the United States imported 5 million gallons of cod liver oil, a level ten times the meager one-half million gallons imported in 2000.[3] If we consider the generous doubling of the population over this period, implicitly the average per capita consumption of cod liver oil in the United States currently stands at less than one-twentieth 1927 levels.

Cod liver oil is a premier buffer for winter. It is a rich source of vitamin A (immune function); vitamin D (strong bones, immune system, relief for depression[4]); omega-3 oils (healthy nervous system, relief from pain and inflammation, antidote for depression). Cod liver oil, as a rich source of vitamins A and D, works synergistically with other cofactors like calcium and arachidonic acid found in other animal products to support mental focus and emotional well-being. Some of the best work in this field comes from Chris Masterjohn. In his 2008 *Wise Traditions* article "The Pursuit of Happiness: How Nutrient-dense Animal Fats Promote Mental and Emotional Health" he provides the biochemistry and scientific detail to support the conclusion that good fats and oils containing vitamin A and D along with calcium

[2] Economic Research Service, USDA.
[3] Katharine Blunt and Ruth Cowan, *Ultraviolet Light and Vitamin D in Nutrition* and Krispin Sullivan.
[4] http://www.vitamindcouncil.org/depression.shtml

and arachidonic acid work synergistically to help protect again depression and anxiety, while also supporting focused, goal-oriented behavior:

> *Modern science has now elucidated the role of nutrient-dense animal fats in preventing mental illness and supporting the focused, goal-oriented behavior needed to confront challenges and pursue a happy, satisfying, and successful life.* …Chris Masterjohn

The Feel-Good Fats

The foods that protect us against depression and help us engage in low time-preference, future-oriented activities are the same foods that traditional cultures valued for good health. They provide vitamins A and D, calcium, and arachidonic acid in abundance.

Cod liver oil (vitamins A and D)
Butter from grass-fed animal (arachidonic acid, vitamins A and D)
Egg yolks from grass-fed chickens (arachidonic acid, vitamins A and D)
Fats from grass-fed animals (arachidonic acid, vitamins A and D)
Organ meats from grass-fed animals (arachidonic acid, vitamins A and D)
Bone broths (calcium)
Raw whole milk from grass-fed animals (calcium, arachidonic acid, vitamins A and D)
Fish eggs (vitamins A and D)
Small whole fish (calcium, vitamins A and D)
Shell fish (vitamins A and D)

Source: Chris Masterjohn

To this "feel good' list I would add unrefined, extra-virgin coconut oil, a saturated fat that is high in anti-microbial lauric acid and, as a medium-chain fatty acid, metabolizes rapidly to provide quick energy.

Additional Comments:

- **Cod liver oil (CLO)—** Taken in moderation, CLO is generally safe for most people and causes no major reactions. However, if you are on medications, it is best to check with your doctor before using it. Dosage for the winter months of ½ to 2 teaspoons a day is generally appropriate unless you are pregnant, in the intense sun or sunbath regularly, take vitamin A supplements, or are scheduled for imminent surgery (since it affects blood clotting). Fermented CLO is more easily digested than regular CLO, and it is more nutrient-dense so you can take less. In summer, to avoid vitamin D toxicity if you spend long hours in the sun, you may wish to switch to fish oil, which has no vitamin D (or vitamin A for that matter). All CLO is screened by the Association of Analytical Communities (AOAC) for 32 contaminants before being imported. Mercury is water soluble so it appears in the flesh of fish but not in CLO and fish oils.
- **Butter for Pastured Animals—**Butter, extra-virgin coconut oil, and other saturated animal fats work synergistically with CLO for its assimilation and utilization. To benefit, consume both.
- **Egg Yolks—**After CLO, egg yolks are the second most potent source of vitamin D, but only if hens are exposed to full sunlight, sunlamps or receive a 2% dietary CLO supplement. Eggs from commercially-raised hens may not provide the nutrition that we have come to expect.
- **Liver—**Liver is rich in B vitamins, iron, arachidonic acid and vitamin A but not vitamin D. It can provide a sense of well-being for anyone concerned about vitamin D excess. [CLO is a rich source of vitamins A, D, and DHA, but unlike liver, it provides no iron or B vitamins.]
- **Bone Broths—**Bone broths are best using bones of organic, grass-fed animals.

- Finally, if you begin a program of consuming these healthy fats and oils, allow a few weeks to feel the positive benefits. Depressive symptoms diminish over time with daily use (The Hordland Health Study).

A Word about the "Feel-Good" Nutrients:

- **Vitamin A—**Liver and cod liver oil are by far the richest sources of vitamin A. Vitamin A is important for proper immune function, vision, the digestive system, and healthy skin.
- **Vitamin D—**Vitamin D helps maintain healthy bones and teeth, assists in blood pressure regulation, strengthens the immune system, and reduces the risk of many forms of cancer, and can work as an anti-depressant.
- **Omega-3 Fatty Acids, EPA and DHA—***Omega-3s* help reduce pain and inflammation and the inflammatory response. *EPA* reduces inflammation and works as an antidepressant. *DHA* supports a healthy nervous system, vision, learning and mental function, relieves depression, and promotes healthy skin.
- **Arachidonic acid (AA)—**AA supports growth, digestive health, fertility, healthy skin and hair.

A Yin/Yang Word of Caution—Any Extreme Can Transform to the Opposite—More is Not Better…
Cod liver oil, when used in moderation and complemented with quality saturated fats for assimilation, can support health and vitality and ameliorate a variety of health conditions. Omega-3s help relieve pain and inflammation for arthritis sufferers; reduce stress and relieve depression; prevent allergies and cancers; and relieve high blood pressure. They also work to support healthy skin and hair.

However, excessive levels of CLO and fish oils can disrupt immune function, result in scaly skin and hair loss, elevate blood pressure, cause internal bleeding, and create complications for diabetics—the very issues that in moderation they address. Cod liver oil, a rich source of fat-soluble vitamins A and D, can accumulate in the body (unlike water soluble vitamins) and lead to toxicity. Always use cod liver oil and fish oils with care. More is *not* better.

Shopping Resources:

- **Cod Liver Oil and X-Factor Butter Oil**: GreenPasture.org and Radiant Life.com are several reliable sources. I like Blue Ice "Cinnamon Tingle" Cod Liver Oil which I order from GreenPasture.org. I find its ".org" status to be reassuring.
- **Liver:** North Star Bison and Hawthorne Valley Farms are several fine providers, or consult your local Weston A. Price Foundation chapter for other source in your area.
- **Seafood, Canned Salmon, and Sardines:** Try Vital Choice.com for wild, sustainably-caught fish and seafood. Their website is a wealth of information.

For other suggestions, see the Resources tab of my website and January, 2009 The *Gift of the Kitchen*.

Reading Resources:

Mary Enig, *Know Your Fats;* and, Udo Eramus, *Fats that Heal, Fats that Kill*
Chris Masterjohn, "The Pursuit of Happiness: How Nutrient-dense Animal Fats Promote Mental and Emotional Health," *Winter 2008, Wise Traditions.*
M. Baroy Raeder, V.M. Steen, S. Emil Vollset and I. Bjelland (2007). Associations between cod liver oil use and symptoms of depression: The Hordaland Health Study. *Journal of Affective Disorders,* 101 (1-3), 245-249.
A Primer on Fats and Oils and additional articles and tables on fats and oils located on my website.

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Winter Recipes—Cooking in Season: Bone Stocks and Cooking with Bones

On cold, invigorating days, I think of my stock pot. I like to fill it with an organic chicken or two, some vegetables, and leave it for hours to slow-simmer. For me, nothing feeds the soul more than the inviting, nurturing aromas of a bone stock. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, bones are associated with winter and with our "kidney essence" energy. Beyond the calcium and other minerals that they provide, they also seem to feed our deep inner energy and convey a profound sense of well-being. Bone stocks are versatile and can be used in cooking grains, hot cereals, and soups to add flavor and nutrition to meals. Used this way, they are an especially good tool to add nutrition to meal—especially if you have a picky eater in the house (see February, 2010, *Investing in Stocks*).

Winter is also the perfect season to cook with bones. Bones enrich winter soups and stews. And, they lend extra character and extra nutrition to slow-simmering meals that feature beans, legumes, and grains (see March, 2010, *Putting Bones Back on Your Meat*.)

Very, Very Rich Chicken Bone Stock...A bowl or two can make a meal.
3-4 pound chicken, whole or in parts
12 cups cold water
3 or 4 large carrots
2 or 3 celery stalks, with leaves
1 parsnip
1 onion, peeled
½ head garlic
1 leek
2 or 3 sprigs fresh thyme
Handful fresh parsley leaves and stems
8 peppercorns
1 bay leaf
Other vegetable scraps, like fennel fronds, chard stems or squash ends
2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
Fine sea salt to taste

Into a large stock pot, place cleaned chicken and water and bring to a boil. Lower the heat and simmer, uncovered, for about 15 minutes. Skim and discard any foam that appears.
Meanwhile, clean the vegetables and herbs, and cut the vegetables into large pieces so that they will fit inside the pot. Add all the ingredients, except the sea salt, to the soup pot. Bring the soup to a boil again, reduce the heat to very low, and simmer uncovered. After the first hour of simmering, remove the chicken, take the meat off the bone, and set it aside to be added back to the soup when it's finished cooking (boiled meat is rather spent after 6 hours in a pot). Simmer the soup uncovered for another five hours. Then remove it from the heat, strain, skim the fat if necessary, and serve with the reserved chicken pieces. This serves a family of five, so it can be cut down.

Source: Ellen Arian, www.ellensfoodandsoul.com