

INSIDE THE WINTER WONDERLAND OF THE COOP'S PRODUCE AISLE

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by John B. Thomas

Winter in the Northeastern United States is not typically a season associated with fresh produce. It's not synonymous with the tomatoes, lettuces, and berries that fill the Coop produce aisle in spring, summer, and fall. Yet many fruits and vegetables are harvested in the fall and store well for winter consumption. Vegetables like pumpkins, Brussels sprouts, and rutabaga and fruits like grapefruits can add a rich diversity to our diets.

At the same time, keeping the Coop shelves stocked with year-round favorites like tomatoes and avocados means that our produce buyers sometimes have to look further afield than our region to source produce that satisfies member needs while also meeting the environmental and social responsibility ethos of the Coop.

To understand more about what considerations go into sourcing produce in the winter, the *Linewaiters Gazette* interviewed Produce Coordinator and Buyer Cecelia Rem-

bert. A lightly edited transcript of the interview is below.

What is typically considered “winter” produce?

Our local winter produce is mostly storage items grown locally in the fall—winter squashes, sweet potatoes and potatoes, onions, root vegetables like rutabaga, kohlrabi, turnips, celeriac, and fruits like apples. We are at this time still able to get some local green vegetables—like broccoli, spinach, chard, dandelions, tatsoi, chicory, and radicchio—the dark and bitter greens are the cold-hardest. We also still have a little bit of local greenhouse grown loose and head lettuce (e.g. loose Asian mix, Queen’s greens winter gem loose salad mix, local little gem heads), but many of our lettuces are now coming out of California or the Southeast. For fruits, only the apples are still local. Everything else comes from further afield.

LOOK FOR MANDARINQUATS AND ALGERIAN TANGERINES, BOTH OF WHICH ARE ON THE SHELVES NOW!

What are some of the winter produce items in stock at the Coop now?

Many people also associate winter with the citrus season in Florida, California, and Texas, and we do have many citruses beginning to arrive from those locations, including delicious Texas grapefruit, Kishu mandarins, markut and sweet limes, Meyer lemons, limequat, satsumas, clementines and pummelos, and more new citrus arriving every week. Winter is also a time of some tropical fruits, like passionfruit, feijoa, sapodilla and eggfruit (canistel), coming from both California and Florida. We also have a relationship with a family vineyard in Moldova and enjoy their sustainably--grown loose seeded black grapes from December to March.



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Are there some items that we continue to source throughout the winter that have to come from farther away?

Avocados are grown year-round in Mexico (except a few months where we can source the organic avocados from California) so really they don't experience much change. During the local season (May to November) we are able to source many local tomatoes, and indeed we are now sourcing some Mexico tomatoes (mostly plum and cluster) alongside greenhouse-grown tomatoes from the United States. Berries are coming from far away right now—our blackberries and raspberries are out of Mexico, but blueberries are mostly out of Peru right now. We don't offer strawberries at this time because the quality-cost axis inverts. What that means is that the cost exceeds the quality during the winter and so we pass. Bell peppers are sourced from some far-flung locations, including Israel, Mexico and the Netherlands. Cucumbers are sometimes sourced from Mexico right now, as are bagged sweet peppers. Lady Moon is a reliable and high-quality grower out of Florida and Georgia and we are able to source

eggplant, some peppers and some kales, head lettuces and other greens through the early winter; likewise we are able to source other squashes and greens from New Sprout Growers, a cooperative of organic farms in the Carolinas.



PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLANE

WE HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH A FAMILY VINEYARD IN MOLDOVA AND ENJOY THEIR SUSTAINABLY-GROWN LOOSE SEEDED BLACK GRAPES FROM DECEMBER TO MARCH.

What items do we explicitly choose not to buy during the winter, for sustainability (or other) reasons, that might be in stock at a normal grocery store?

Strawberries do not make the cut in the winter, although we usually bring them back for a week in February for those members who desire them for Valentine's Day. We

are also very selective with our grape options over the winter. Grapes are imported from Peru and South Africa over the winter and we will get these in small quantities, but generally the quality is not as high as the California season, although the pricing can be shockingly high. We wait for Mexican grapes in April and May and then California follows in June. We move out of early-season apples as the quality declines and shift our apple program to late-season and storage apple varieties.

Are there any other seasonal goods you'd recommend Coop members try this winter?

My favorite winter produce? Terrific local broccoli; local radicchios of all varieties, local root vegetables like sunchokes, rutabaga and black radish, buck brand satsumas, pink lady apples, feijoa, and winter squashes like sweet dumpling, acorn and kabocha. And look for mandarinquats and Algerian tangerines, both of which are on the shelves now! We also have really delicious small-farm organic turmeric from Florida. It just arrived and will run for a few months. It's incomparably better than the turmeric we are usually able to get (from Hawaii or Fiji). And then finally, my number one favorite fruit of all the year is the Melogold grapefruit from Buck Brand Citrus. It's a cross between a pomelo and a grapefruit and it's absolutely delicious.

John B. Thomas works in sustainability and social impact for a performance apparel company.



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