

The search for food sustainability in Alaska

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ALASKA

Alaska is not the easiest place to live a sustainable life. In fact, since moving here in 1993, I have struggled to find a way to live more lightly on the land. One of the first resources I had was COUNTRYSIDE magazine, and I could hardly wait for it to show up in my mail, flown in by small bush plane along with groceries and propane.

Of course, much of that information remained just a dream to me as I lived four miles from the terminus of a glacier in the Alaska Range of mountains. My growing season was short, cold and windy, with a dusting of poor glacial silt over rock. I spent seven years on this small homestead 40 miles from the road, and I was very aware of the impacts that I made.

There were the triumphs, stockpiling bags of dirt I bought on sale in Fairbanks at the end of the season. I hauled them from the highway to our place in February via snow machine once the river had frozen in temperatures of -30°F. This soil was a small glimmer of what I hoped I could do; grow some of our own food to add to the moose meat, blueberries and cranberries we harvested.

I did build raised beds and screened the meager topsoil out of the moss to add to my precious store-bought soil. The fence around my tiny garden kept the moose out, although I chased off more than one cow and calf at two in the morning as they reached their necks over to pluck kale.

I added a greenhouse built with rebar hauled up the river, and managed to get a bit more growing time

from the year. All of that work was erased by a hundred-year flood two years ago, when the tiny creek that ran by the cabin became a raging river. The cabin was saved by the “dam” my greenhouse created as it was swept away.

This land is no place to go it alone I decided. It seemed too hard to try to homestead in the interior with just two people. I wanted more of a community. I spent time in Fairbanks working on an organic herb/vegetable farm and sold the produce and vinegars at the farmers market. At the end of the day the vendors would swap remaining items with each other; I never went hungry. The Tanana Valley is a vibrant farming community blessed with warm summers, plenty of sunshine and afternoon rain showers.

There are many Alaskas though, and I wanted to see the southeast panhandle. I moved to Baranof Island a year ago and have been once again amazed at the power of community. Of course issues of food security come to the forefront when most of your food comes via barge from the lower 48. To address community health priorities a local non-profit

group was formed in 2008 called the Sitka Local Foods Network. They are dedicated to promoting the growing, harvesting and eating of local foods. Now community gardens, a farmers market and a future community greenhouse project are sprouting.

A local friend and film maker named Ellen Frankenstein took it one step further by writing, directing and producing the documentary “Eating Alaska.” With humor and compassion she shows Native Alaskans and non-natives trying to balance buying industrial processed foods with growing their own and living off the land in the 21st century.

This former urban vegetarian shares her journey into regional food traditions by exploring our connection to where we live and what we put into our mouths. “Eating Alaska” is showing from Nome to New York City and Cuba, from living rooms and public libraries to conferences and food co-ops. It has screened at the Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival and many others. A recent screening guide Ellen created has a promising future of use in schools and home school programs.

It is exciting to be a part of this place. The power of this remote community has sent ripples out and added to the conversation on local foods, food security, regional food sheds, and the search for sustainable eating. COUNTRYSIDERS already know that what and how we eat makes a difference and now we can see it around us every day.

If you are interested in more information check out www.eatingalaska.com and www.sitkalocalfoodsnetwork.org.

