



ILLUSTRATION BY MARY KIRKPATRICK

Our annual First Day Feast starts the year off right

FIRST PERSON

We realized the celebration of locally sourced food was much bigger than just a fun meal and had the potential to join Thanksgiving as a cultural event, **Robert Butler** writes

If you have been around as long as me, you will have noticed how each year blends with all the others; Thanksgiving is chased closely by Halloween and before we know it Christmas arrives just before we slide into a new year.

One year, my wife Sharon and I decided to change the holidays up with a First Day Feast. This was not going to be just another celebration of food and festivities; all the food would be locally sourced. The First Day Feast was going to make us think, in a fun way, about our choices for the rest of the year.

I posed a crazy question: could an entire meal be made from food around the Salish Sea – the body of water between mainland British Columbia and Vancouver Island?

There should be lots of choices where we live in New Westminster, east of Vancouver. Our house overlooks the Fraser River, one of the world's greatest salmon-producing rivers. Beyond that are farmlands growing vegetables for local stores and markets. Honey is produced on some farms, cattle churn out butter, milk and cream on others which supply local cheeseworks. Sea salt from along the shore and wine from grapes on the Gulf Islands add to the flavour of our good times.

We would invite our family to witness the feast on the first day of the year. I hoped the feast might support local sustainable food production but if it didn't, at least the attempt would be fun

Sometimes, locating locally produced

food in December seemed daunting. If we wanted to include bread, where would we find local flour and yeast? And what about spices? No pepper. No cinnamon. No nutmeg. No cloves. No olive oil!

We dropped by the market on Granville Island in downtown Vancouver where a lot of local produce was sold. To our surprise, we could get many fresh vegetables. In our garden we grew rosemary, thyme, sage and onions. We checked the fine print on labels and spoke to merchants to discover locally produced beef, seafood, sea salt, wine and fruit. Their eyes lit up when we explained what we were trying to accomplish. We rejoiced when they suggested substituting honey for sugar, herbs for spice, and hazelnut oil for olive oil.

But what about bread? Were we going to be defeated by the absence of any bread? We found locally produced flour but we needed yeast. Bread had an ancient history so Sharon thought we might resort to growing our own yeast. On the internet, she found how to make yeast from potato water that she later added to a dough for a boule.

The First Day Feast was launched on Jan. 1, 2013, with our family in attendance and the table overflowing. Outside the dining room window against a garden wall a giant No. 1 lit up the yard. Before us on the table simmered a prime rib roast from the Fraser Valley, steaming potatoes from Pemberton farms, honey from Vancouver Island fireweed, hazelnut oil from orchards in Agassiz, tangy cheese from Qualicum, flour and noodles from Chilliwack, farm fresh eggs from Richmond, salt from Cobble Hill, zesty cranberry juice from Delta, and sprouts from Courtenay. For the vegetarians, Sharon baked a pizza with vegetables, cheese and herbs.

The dessert course was a large apple

pie with a hidden secret inside. We could find no apples grown from around the Salish Sea (although we knew they existed). Our nearest source was from an orchard in Cawston over 200 kilometres away. For this one item, we had broken our own locally sourced rule! The family laughed at some of our attempts to find local sources and had no complaints as they dived in with gusto.

Since that first feast, we have held numerous others, including potlucks where friends were given the same challenge – each with varying success and necessary confessionals.

We concluded that the First Day Feast worked with our family but would it work as a bigger event, we wondered?

We realized that the First Day Feast was much bigger than just a fun meal. The Feast had the potential to join Thanksgiving as a cultural event, at least in our West Coast community. Even across the country, anyone anywhere could contribute in a fusion of festive ideas. If fresh locally produced food in winter is not an option where you live, just serve a single dish or preserve some local foods

ahead of time.

First Day Feasts could be a cultural impetus to preserve the land, the livelihoods and the resources.

While cleaning up after our first First Day dinner, Sharon and I talked about how the meal was a hit and it got me thinking about a culture connected to nature. "It was what Indigenous people have been saying forever," I said.

Robert Butler lives in New Westminster, B.C.

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