



PRAIRIE FEAST

rediscovering taste one bite at a time

AMY JO EHMAN



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Rediscovering Taste One Bite at a Time

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A gorgeous new book from Coteau Books, *Prairie Feast* is a feast for the eyes and for the soul. Celebrating the slow food movement that is taking our country by storm, *Prairie Feast: Rediscovering Taste One Bite at a Time* redefines the dinner table and the art of eating locally.

Through the writings of journalist, Amy Jo Ehman, the reader is taken on a journey of flavours, fresh off the farm. Plump raspberries by the handful. Carrots still clinging with soil. Sweet corn shucked, boiled and smothered in butter. A slice of apple pie in winter redolent of a hot, lazy summer day.

Beautiful photographs enhance Amy Jo's mouth-watering menus, recipes and her adventures in the pursuit of home grown prairie food.

It is not about miles, it is a way of life. It is our community, our history and an opportunity to find ourselves in the food we eat.



Prairie Feast is a love story, a celebration of every good thing this bountiful land has to offer. It will inspire all conscious consumers to follow their taste buds home for dinner.

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AMY JO EHMAN is a freelance writer based in Saskatoon and is a regular contributor to CBC, *Prairies North* magazine and *The Saskatoon StarPhoenix*. An accomplished speaker, Amy Jo is invited to local food festivals across the country to speak on the advantage of local eating. This is her first book.

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COUNTING DOWN

THE 101-MILE DIET

ONE DAY WHILE I WAS OUT, the postman left a parcel card in our mailbox. The next day, I went to the postal kiosk at our neighbourhood drug store to pick up the parcel.

“I hope you drove,” said the postal clerk, “because it’s a heavy one.” She heaved a box onto the counter. “What is it?” she asked. “Books? Bricks?”

I checked the return address. Cerridwen Farm, Medstead, Saskatchewan. “No,” I said. “It’s lentils. Lentils and split peas.”

She raised an eyebrow, and who could blame her? Not many people order groceries through the

mail. But when you're on a special diet, unusual measures are called for. And my diet was special. For better or worse, richer or poorer, fatter or thinner, my husband and I had pledged ourselves to a diet that was almost entirely local fare. For one whole year, just about everything on our dinner table – from asparagus in spring to zucchini in fall – would be grown or raised right here in Saskatchewan.

“Can't you buy lentils in a grocery store?” she asked.

A very good question. The short answer is yes. The long answer is a story. I used to buy lentils at the Saskatoon Farmers' Market, but the farmer stopped coming to the market and I missed him. So I gave him a call. I thought perhaps a little customer appreciation might lure him back, but, as it turns out, he was already awash in customer appreciation – halfway across the country. He was shipping his lentils to grocery stores near Vancouver where the clientele has family roots in those parts of the world where lentils are daily fare. For the farmer, it made much more sense (and cents) to ship his lentils out west than to drive more than two hours to a farmers' market once a week to sell them himself. However, he said, I could order them by mail.

Another customer had come up behind me at the postal counter and, since the clerk was expecting small talk and not a dissertation, I decided on the short answer.

“Yes,” I said, “but these are local organic lentils. It's hard to know in the grocery store if you're getting local lentils because the labels aren't marked.” I wrapped my arms around the box and lifted it off the counter, hugging it tightly. The last thing I needed was to put my back out carrying lentils to the car.

“*Bon appetite,*” said the clerk, sounding rather more dubious than heartfelt about my next meal. I could not be sure if her scepticism related to the preferential treatment of locally produced food or to the

notion that a lentil might be local to anywhere in Saskatchewan. If I'd had more time (and perhaps a soapbox, as there were now several people in line behind me), I might have told her that, in a mere twenty years, Saskatchewan had become one of the world's top producers of lentils. Every day, folks from Columbia to Bangladesh sit down to a bowl of lentils grown in Saskatchewan.

But it was early 2005, and the local food movement had not yet hit the social radar screen. Terms like food miles, locavores, and 100-mile diets weren't bandied about as they are today, with food mile calculators, local food conferences, and 100-mile potlucks as common as borscht. Back then, when I told our friends about our local food adventure, no amount of enthusiasm on my part could quite convince them we had not gone off the culinary deep end. While they politely said, "That's nice, but why?" their eyes screamed, "John, you poor guy, what has she got you in to? Drop by when you need a real meal..."

I decided we would start our local diet on the first day in spring that we could eat something green from the garden. From the vantage point of a brilliant winter afternoon, with the garden under a mountain of snow, there was no telling when that day might be. This uncertainty appealed to me. There was no X on the calendar. No "two more sleeps." No Last Supper. No anxious anticipation and no growing dread. We would slide into it as naturally and effortlessly as a breath of spring wind. Since we were already buying a lot of our food locally, we could think of it as a "spring forward" rather than a "fall back." More of a good thing rather than less of everything else.

Spring is the practical time to kick off a year of eating locally because, I was quite sure, I would need an entire growing season to prepare for the winter months. Considerable effort would be required to stock my larder, fill the freezer, harvest my garden, process sufficient quantities of

fruit, and source a myriad of other items required for a varied and balanced diet worthy of the Good Food Guide. In times of traditional agrarian lifestyles – that is, any time prior to 1950 – spring was the lean time, the in-between time when food supplies were running low and the land was not yet producing more. Unless we planned ahead, I feared our Saskatchewan diet might not survive to the following spring. Our hearts may be willing, but a weak stomach could lose faith.

The timing was also symbolic because I expected to derive a fair amount of food from my garden. It's not a big garden, but it is productive. We could count on salad greens, peas, zucchini, eggplant, spinach, tomatoes and green beans, plus enough dried herbs and frozen tomatoes to last until spring. The previous fall, I had planted a row of lettuce and radish seeds, which were now hibernating under the snow, just waiting for the wake-up call of spring, when they would sprout at the first hint of warm earth. If all went well, we would be eating baby greens from the garden by mid-May.

In hindsight, it's a good thing I didn't try to predict the first day we would eat something green from our garden, because I would have been wrong. That day came sooner than expected, a precocious Saturday in mid-April filled with the aroma of damp earth and the twitter of small birds who were just as delighted as I was to see the tail end of the snow. I had rediscovered the rake after a long winter affair with the snow shovel, and went to work clearing away last fall's leaves from the front garden. As I pulled the rake through the dead, dry remains of the chives, I discovered the tiniest, greenest shoots buried underneath that mat of leaves. The sheer determination of those chives, sprouting even though they could not see the sun, was a sight to warm my heart. I went into the house, grabbed a pair of scissors, and cut them to the quick.

We ate those chives for supper sprinkled on a warm German potato salad, along with some weisswurst sausage from the farmers' market, my mom's pickles, and Penny's homemade mustard. It was the first of hundreds of local meals to come, but first I had to break the news to John.

"Guess what?" I said during supper. He had already swallowed, so there was no turning back.

"What?" he said.

"Guess." I nodded toward his dinner plate.

"Is that the last of Penny's mustard?" he asked.

"Almost," I said. "But that's not it."

"We're out of your dad's potatoes?"

"Close. But that's not it either."

"Is this the last jar of your mom's pickles?"

"No. You're hoarding another jar in the pantry."

He looked down at his plate, spying those little specks of green on the white potatoes. "Are these chives from the garden?"

"Yes," I said triumphantly, "and you know what that means?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "Our year of monotony has begun..."

Supper Menu #2: Hamburgers made with grass-fed ground beef, artisanal bakery buns, Penny's mustard, Mom's pickles, coleslaw, and carrot cake

IN TRUTH, John needed little convincing of the merits of eating locally. Right from the start, he got into the spirit of things, conspiring in his own way to fill the larder with local fare. He went ice fishing. He cajoled a hunting buddy into "donating" some moose and venison to the cause. He did a bit of work in exchange for a fresh jar of Penny's homemade mustard. And for a small consulting job, he took payment

in a bucket of Saskatchewan wild rice. You can hardly argue it was work done “under the table” when it squarely landed on top of ours.

He could also be commended for what he didn’t do. He didn’t complain when I stopped buying apples and bananas from the grocery store. He didn’t mind that the cupboard was no longer stocked with peanut butter, canned tuna, and white rice. He didn’t ask for Gouda or Swiss and made do without store-bought cookies and soda crackers.

Sure, he was a wee bit disparaging at first, but that can be forgiven. On a gut level (both literally and metaphorically, I suppose) a local diet *does* sound a tad boring, but on a philosophical level it makes perfect sense. It’s good for the environment if it cuts the mileage and the expenditure of fossil fuels. There’s less wasted food and packaging for the landfill. It’s easier to source food produced without pharmaceuticals, preservatives, and other adulterations that maintain the illusion of quality, freshness, and taste. It’s better for your health because local produce is usually picked at its peak, so the nutrients are not depleted by under-ripening and long months in storage. It’s good for the community because your grocery dollars stay in the local economy, sustaining smaller farms and processors. I welcomed the personal touch of meeting the people who produce my food, commiserating over the weather or discussing the merits of this variety of tomato and that variety of corn. Best of all, I love the way it tastes. Eating is not a matter of choice, but eating well is.

John already knew this because he is an environmentalist at heart. He attended the University of Wisconsin–LaCrosse, where several of his professors had studied under Aldo Leopold, that quiet, persuasive conservationist who had inspired a generation of young Americans to value the respectful use, not blind abuse, of the natural world. Leopold’s musings about life on a Wisconsin farm, *A Sand County Almanac*, inspired John to build a little cabin in the woods of

Trempealeau County, where he raised chickens, chopped firewood, and lived off venison steaks and baked beans until a job took him back to town.

As a carpenter, he is a student of the Arts and Crafts movement and of the work of furniture maker Gustav Stickley of Osceola, Wisconsin. For Stickley and his Craftsman movement, the most beautiful objects are made by hand, not mass-produced by machines, based on a principle of beautiful functionality rather than cheap excess. John also admires the work of another Wisconsin son, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Prairie style, which calls for harmony between structure and landscape, using materials natural to the locale, with uncluttered spaces and abundant natural light.

These same principles, when applied to supper, challenge us to dine on fresh, natural, locally produced food rather than gorging on the cornucopia of worldly excess offered up in the grocery stores. In the Craftsman tradition, a recipe is a blueprint for fashioning fresh ingredients into something more wonderful than the raw materials alone, unadulterated by artificial fads and fancies, made by hand, and consumed with love. It doesn't look afar for satisfaction because the greatest rewards are simple and close to home. If food is a product of the environment, as it surely is, it should inspire in us the same sense of awe and appreciation that we feel when drinking in a beautiful sunset or admiring the delicate dovetails of a handmade chest of drawers.

Lunch Menu #3: Homemade bread and a bowl of ham and split pea soup

ON A CRISP WINTER DAY, long before the chives were stirring in the soil, I sat down at the kitchen table and made a list of all the Saskatchewan foods we already had on hand. It was an impressive list: grass-fed beef

and lamb; free-range chickens and eggs; lentils and split peas; flax and flour; pepperoni and weisswurst; raspberries and saskatoons; apple-sauce and preserved pears; cabbage and carrots; wild venison and wild fish. In the spice rack, there were coriander, mustard, and chili powder, and in the fridge were jars of jelly, pickles, mustard, and sauerkraut.

Then I made a list of the things we would need. This included staples such as milk and cheese, pasta and beans, pearl barley and rolled oats. We would need more fruit such as cherries and blueberries; more spices like cumin and caraway; more wild foods including mushrooms and wild rice. More vegetables, more beans, more fish, and more pork (having finished our pig with the little red hat, and our friends having divorced and moved off the farm). I would also need a year's worth of new recipes – recipes that made the most of Saskatchewan ingredients without resorting to the same old standbys week after week. We could probably survive on a diet of pork chops, baked potatoes, and saskatoon berry pie, but that would only prove my husband absolutely right. Boring.

Brunch Menu #14: Breakfast sausages, fried potatoes, apple-rosemary jelly, and for dessert, Prairie Berry Clafoutis

I MADE A FEW GROUND RULES. First and foremost, we would follow our local diet at our own dinner table and *only* our dinner table. We would not impose it at the homes of family and friends for fear of never being invited back again. And we wouldn't try to eat locally when eating out because very few restaurants cared a whit about local fare. (Fortunately, that has changed.) Nor would it apply to beverages because John was not about to give up his morning cup of joe, and while I do like a tumbler of cold milk now and then, I was not about to give up the occasional glass of wine with dinner. (There is now a vineyard in Saskatchewan,

near Maple Creek, but since they sell out so quickly, I have yet to enjoy a bottle of their table wine.)

My third rule was the easiest to follow: I would cheat now and then. After all, the occasional teeny-weeny well-intentioned indiscretion would not spoil the broth. In fact, it might sweeten the pot immeasurably. So, for instance, if I needed a pinch of cinnamon for a fragrant Moroccan lamb stew, Worcestershire sauce for shepherd's pie, lemon juice for a salad dressing, or raisins for bread pudding, well, so be it. Saskatchewan produces all the ingredients for a wonderful bowl of pasta, so why not make it truly great with a bit of olive oil and parmesan cheese? If the primary ingredients were entirely local, I would permit myself a few carefully chosen "foreign" ingredients with nary a pang of guilt. I justified these small indulgences on the grounds that our local diet was not meant to be an exercise in frugality and hardship – not a sacrifice, but a celebration of local food.

For more than a century, Saskatchewan has been producing food for the world, and I intended to find out what the world was doing with it. I pored over cookbooks of world cuisines looking for their dishes that could be made with our ingredients. Southern France and northern Italy were easy: tomatoes, peppers, chard, spinach, zucchini, eggplant, basil, oregano, and thyme. Saskatchewan is one of the world's largest suppliers of top-quality durum wheat for pasta – even the Italians use it. From Germany and Eastern Europe: potatoes and beans, cabbage and apples, rye bread with caraway, bratwurst, weisswurst, and a fat coil of garlic sausage. From Middle Eastern cuisine: lentils and chickpeas, yogurt and honey, cumin and lamb. From India: chickpeas and chicken, peas and potatoes, fenugreek and mustard seed. Saskatchewan is the world's top exporter of mustard seed – even the famous French Dijon is made with it. From Mexico: the "three sisters," corn, pinto beans, and squash.

From Asia: fish, pork, eggs, bean sprouts, cilantro, and mushrooms. Pine mushrooms from our northern forests are a delicacy in Japan.

The possibilities seemed endless. Swedish meatballs in cream sauce and pancakes with lingonberries. Bolognese sauce and beef daube. Huevos rancheros and refried beans. Tempura and yakitori. Samosas and pakoras. Falafel and kibbe nayyeh. Clafoutis and apfelkuchen. Bangers and mash, fish and chips, toad-in-the-hole. As I collected recipes from around the world, it struck me how often the same ingredients, when placed in different hands, could be transformed into such diverse and authentic dishes. Even bread made with the basic ingredient of Saskatchewan wheat flour could be tortillas or naan, paska or pita, challah or baguette, croissants or scones.

Dinner Menu #31: Tonkatsu, okonomiyaki (made with fresh bean sprouts from my windowsill), and an Asian-flavoured coleslaw

HOW EASY IT IS TO TAKE the grocery store for granted. One grocery list, one checkout line, one cheery clerk who never fails to smile and call you by name as if you're old friends. One overflowing shopping cart, one wobbly trajectory through the parking lot, one drive home. One world at your fingertips. One-stop shopping at its best. One more job ticked off the list. One thing missing – local food. How ironic it is that, while Saskatchewan is producing food for the world, it is almost impossible to find the label “Product of Saskatchewan” in the local grocery store.

It soon became apparent that shopping for local food would require the investigative acumen of Sherlock Holmes, the astute questioning of Jessica Fletcher, and the deductive reasoning of Hercule Poirot. It was not enough to read labels, which could be as misleading as a cagey suspect. A polite line of questioning could lead nowhere. Observation

was out – who can tell by observing a bean where it’s been? It takes a sleuth to uncover the edible truth, like peeling an onion or getting to the bottom of the pot one nibble at a time.

The fact is, most of the food produced in Saskatchewan goes somewhere else for processing and comes back to us with cryptic labels that give no indication of the point of origin. My extensive research (i.e., talking to anyone in the know) has taught me a few things about the food we eat. For instance, I learned that any bag of lentils labelled as a product of Canada is almost guaranteed to be from Saskatchewan because that is where the bulk of the nation’s lentils come from. Any can of chickpeas canned in Canada must have, by law of averages, some Saskatchewan chickpeas in it. A package of pasta that lists the ingredient “Canadian amber durum wheat” is most likely a product of Saskatchewan because that’s where most of the amber durum wheat is grown. A jar of coriander or mustard seed probably originates you know where, because Saskatchewan farmers have pretty much cornered the market on both.

What about milk, I wondered? Or cheese? How could I be assured of buying a dairy product that originated from a Saskatchewan cow? Unlike the cheese-loving cultures of, say, Quebec and Wisconsin, there is no artisanal cheese-making in Saskatchewan, at least none licensed for public sale. There is one commercial dairy in Saskatchewan, the Saputo plant in the north end of Saskatoon, so I telephoned and asked the kind receptionist to list the products and brand names that came off their assembly line. She gave me a phone number for consumer affairs. Clue number one: it was in Montreal.

I dialled the number and explained what I was up to – that I wanted to eat locally and would like to patronize their dairy products if she would be so kind as to inform me what they were. She took my inquiry

and promised to call back. Several weeks and several messages later, I finally spoke with someone who could answer my question. And the answer was no.

“We don’t give out that information,” she said politely.

“Why not?”

“Because we don’t want consumers to be shopping that way.”

Detective Poirot would have been proud of me because suddenly a light went on in my head. What at first appeared illogical (you mean you *don't* want me to buy your products?) now made perfect sense. Dairy companies, like so many other food processors, have consolidated and centralized their production to such an extent that very little of it is local anymore. Milk is bottled in one place but the fellow who pours it on his morning cereal might be two time zones away. If I was eager to shop locally in my home community, where did it leave those local shoppers everywhere else? Switching brands, no doubt.

I called a dairy farmer, who provided another couple of clues. First, the major brand produced at the Saskatoon facility is called Dairyland. Second, each dairy facility has an identification number that must be displayed on the container. “In case there’s a problem, it can be traced,” he said.

A couple of trips to the grocery store and I deduced the number of the Saskatoon dairy facility to be 4015. There it was, 4015, on Dairyland yogurt, sour cream, milk, cottage cheese, cream, and half-and-half. But no cheese. The farmer had mentioned cheddar and mozzarella, but I had not uncovered any cheese from 4015. I dialled the dairy again, this time after business hours. The man who answered the telephone didn’t sound like he was wearing a suit.

“Why are you asking?” he said.

I decided that honestly was the best policy. “I live here in Saskatoon

and I want to patronize your products, but I can't find 4015 on any cheese."

"That's because we make it here and it's shipped to Alberta to be cut and packaged."

"What's the brand name?"

"Armstrong."

"So it's packaged there and shipped back here?"

"That's right."

"So it has their number?"

"That's right."

"And do you know what their number is?"

"No. Why are you asking again?"

**Dinner Menu #52: Homemade pizza with bison pepperoni,
green pepper, mozzarella, and the Bertolini family tomato sauce**

YOU KNOW you're an old married couple when your ideal date is not a movie or a romantic drive or a bit of close dancing, but a trip to the farmers' market on Saturday morning, the earlier the better. Whether walking or cycling, we take the long way along the riverbank, under the canopy of elm trees on Spadina Crescent, past the art gallery and the gargoyles of the Bessborough Hotel, past the bandshell where wedding parties take their photographs and underneath the steel bridge that was built for Model-Ts, and along the water where rowers glide in the still morning air.

At the market, we buy coffees and a big breakfast cookie to share, and find a friend to sit down and visit with. We shop leisurely without a list, buying whatever catches our eye as the seasons roll through the year. We ogle the first greenhouse tomatoes, coo over the fresh asparagus,

swoon for voluptuous eggplant, and lock our purple-stained lips over sweet handfuls of fresh wild blueberries. Will it be walleye or sausages this week? Baguette or whole-grain? Asian flavours or sauerkraut? Temptation crumbles over berry ice cream, fat slices of quiche, and silky fruity yogurt. We satisfy our heart's desires, and John carries the heavy sack home on his shoulder like a schoolboy hefting his sweetheart's books. As a date, it's more social than going to a movie, more economical than dinner out, more wholesome than a nightclub, and more exercise than a game of darts.

Dinner Menu #120: Samosas with tomato chutney, butter chicken, and eggplant curry on wild rice

CULINARY DICTIONARY: Can (noun) – a sealed metal container usually filled with food. Can (verb) – the act of sealing food in glass jars in order to preserve it for another day. Jarring (adjective) - the linguistic incongruity of “canning” with glass, as in, “We canned pears last night. Would you like a jar?”

In the summer of 2004, John built a timber-frame garage on Temperance Street in the shade of a big old pear tree. By the end of August, the tree was thick with small, green, perfectly unripe pears. We picked as many as we could without the use of a hydraulic lift (otherwise known as a cherry picker except, of course, when picking pears) and brought them home to can.

Canning is a lot of work. To start, you need to wash and boil your jars so they are good and clean. While they are boiling, make a syrup by simmering water with honey (sugar works, too) in a proportion that ensures a flavourful concoction without being overly sweet. Peel each and every pear, then pass them to your significant other to chop off the

flesh, immersing the chunks in water tinged with lemon juice to prevent them turning brown. When a significant amount of pear has been cut, scoop it into the simmering syrup and cook for a few minutes, until it just starts to soften. Remove the pears with a slotted spoon and drop them into the hot jars. Pour in enough syrup to cover the pears and screw on the lids. Meanwhile, prepare the water bath: put a big pot of water on the stove and, using a canning rack, lower the jars into the water and boil for a scientifically precise amount of time based on the acid level of the fruit and the altitude of your kitchen, so that the lids are vacuum sealed and any trace pathogen has been vanquished. Oh, and did I mention, this task is usually undertaken in the heat of the summer, so that your kitchen becomes a sauna and you are craving your own water bath – cold.

Having mastered the art of canning, and having undertaken a year of local eating, I went hog wild. I “jarred” not only pears but raspberries, saskatoons, rhubarb, and fruit compote (pears, apples, sour cherries, any teeny tiny grapes). I “jarred” corn relish and apple-rosemary jelly. I “jarred” pickled asparagus and marinated mushrooms (which I kept in the fridge, since a hot water bath is not sufficiently hot enough for preserving low-acid vegetables). At the end of canning season, I took inventory of my stocks with a strong sense of accomplishment, confident we would not lack for fruits and vegetables through the long dark winter months. Then I put away my canning supplies and swore I would never do *that* again. It was too much work.

And then it was January, with its swirling snows and scant hours of sunlight, the happy holiday season behind us and the prospect of spring a distant longing, when we cracked open a jar of pears and ate them slowly, drenched in syrup and summer. I felt the craving of a lover separated, the ache of wanting and the joy of anticipation, when I would

again feel the touch of sunlight filtered through the dappled leaves, and smell the grass and mint and warm compost. And I knew that come summer, I would feel this same craving for a blustery cold day in January warmed by a fire and a bowl of hand-picked pears drenched in syrup. And I knew, in my heart of hearts, my canning days were far from over.

Supper menu # 312: Pork loin with cherry sauce, wild rice pilaf, and a bowl of canned pears

THE 100-MILE DIET is a revolutionary concept, but such strict limits are not for me. From the start, I was motivated by an appetite for healthier, tastier, and socially connected food, with an eye on the local market and not the odometer. Saskatchewan is so vast in terms of distance and production – it covers almost half the cultivated farmland in Canada – that arbitrary boundaries are sure to exclude more than they would include. Should I give up lentils from Medstead (140 miles), blueberries from St. Walburg (160 miles), mushrooms from La Ronge (225 miles), or pearl barley from Estevan (almost 300 miles)? After one leisurely drive from my house in the city to the family farm, my odometer, I couldn't help but notice, reported 163 kilometres – a pleasant and productive 101 miles.



MEDITERRANEAN DIET A LA SASKATCHEWAN

ONE YEAR, I gave my mom a package of basil seeds and asked her to grow some for me on the farm. I had fallen in love with the Mediterranean Diet, and for that I would need a lot of basil. The word “basil” comes from the Greek word for “king,” and there is hardly a fresh summer recipe from Mediterranean cookbooks that doesn’t call for this King of Herbs.

Like everyone else, I had read glowing reports in the popular press which said the Mediterranean Diet is good for your health. It is why, we are told, people in countries like France, Italy, Greece, and Spain live longer, with fewer ailments and extra pounds around the middle, than we do here in North America. And just my luck – many of the key ingredients in the Mediterranean Diet grow very well in my back yard.

Basil seemed right at home in my little city garden, but I had no idea if it would prosper in the big unsheltered, unwatered, prairie garden on the farm. But, toward the end of July, Mom called to say my basil was at the peak of perfection and ready to be picked. Since she and Dad were coming to the city, she offered to bring it to me.

“How much do you want?” she asked.

“A couple bags should be good to start,” I said. I planned to make pesto, in which basil is the main ingredient.

Mom came to my door empty handed. “Go help your dad bring in the basil,” she said.

He was standing by the open trunk of the car. Inside, there were not two, but three big black overstuffed garbage bags. Turns out, basil grows very well indeed on the prairies.

SUMMER RAIN SOUP

It is important to pick the vegetables in the rain. Somehow, the soup just tastes better.

- 1 tsp** **butter**
- 2 tsp** **olive or canola oil**
- 1/2** **small onion, sliced paper thin and chopped**
- 1** **small garlic, finely chopped**
- A mix of vegetables as available in the garden:**
- 1** **banana pepper, chopped**
- 1** **baby eggplant, sliced**
- 8** **green beans, chopped**
- 4 cups** **water**
- 3** **baby zucchini, sliced**
- 3-4** **tomatoes, chopped in bite-sized pieces**
- Handful of fresh basil**
- Salt and pepper**
- 1/2** **cup couscous**

In a saucepan, melt the butter with the oil on medium heat. Sauté the onion and garlic until soft. Add the pepper, eggplant, and green beans. Cook, stirring, sprinkling with a bit of salt and a few grinds of pepper.

When the vegetables are soft, but far from mushy, add the water along with the zucchini and tomatoes. Bring to a simmer and cook until the zucchini and tomatoes are just cooked. Scrunch up the basil, slice into ribbons, and drop it into the water. Taste and add more seasoning if needed.

In the meantime, cook the couscous following package directions. Ladle the soup into bowls, place a spoonful of couscous in the centre of the soup, sprinkle with fresh basil and enjoy that lovely summer rain.

PRAIRIE FEAST

Join Amy Jo for a celebration of local fare
as she launches *Prairie Feast* at the following:

Souleio – Saskatoon, May 8, 2010

The Willow on Wascanca – Regina, May 12, 2010

The Gilead – Toronto, May 30, 2010

Calgary & Vancouver June, 2010

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