

THE ENTREE

## What Farmers Eat from the Farmer's Market

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When you're faced with the same produce again and again, there's no need to resort to the same recipes. If anybody knows how to make endless okra or carrots appealing, it's the farmer who grows it.

Tracey Vowell is a farmer at Three Sisters Gardens in Kankakee, Illinois, 60 miles south of Chicago. "Overabundance," Vowell says, "is a matter of creativity." It's also a matter of storage.

"As we get busier with the regular vegetables," Vowell says, "everybody loses interest in selling herbs." She suggests buying fresh herbs early in the season, and cooking them in stock. Then freeze the stock in ice cube trays. When a recipe needs herbs, add a cube or two for what Vowell describes as a "nice big burst of herb flavor."

Jim and Deb Crum came to farming after retirement. They run Crum's Heirlooms, in Bonner Springs, Kansas. For Deb Crum, the key to staying hungry for the same vegetables over and over is about developing techniques rather than recipes. Crum's two go-to techniques are roasting vegetables and wilting greens. "It'll be three-quarters to a pound of greens between us." But what looks huge raw will simmer down to something smaller. Equipment is important. Crum swears by her solid 12-inch skillet.

With any kind of green, Crums likes to sauté it "with onions, garlic, pepper—hot peppers, whatever—and serving that over cornbread." The mainstay meal, after a day of laboring on the farm, is just as good over polenta. "I'm never afraid to mix whatever vegetable is handy," Crum says, and adds, "an egg is often on top of it."

Cook the greens in olive oil or, if you're using bacon, a bit of bacon fat. With chard, Crum likes tomatoes and a dash of cream. "That's wonderful over pasta. Finish it off with a good Parmesan." If it's arugula, they like to go for an Asian feel, mixing "two or three kinds of mustard, arugula, and tatsoi." It works as a salad or as a stir-fried blend. "We've learned to love arugula, not just in a salad, but cooked."

At Three Sisters Garden, sweet corn season stretches from mid-July into October. During that time, "we eat sweet corn every day," Vowell says. For customers, however, she recommends buying in bulk and then freezing the corn. "Cut the kernels off the [raw] cob and put them in the freezer." Or do as many of her customers do and "put it in the freezer whole and roast it in the winter." In the middle of January, sweet corn soup is summer sunshine in a spoon.

Brad Stufflebeam, of Home Sweet Farm in "the birthplace of Texas: Brenham, Texas," works on the farm and in two farmers' markets, and runs a CSA. That far south, "we are growing all year 'round," he says. In the heat of summer, eggplant, squash, and okra are everywhere. It's a prime time for ratatouille, that improvisation-friendly dish of sautéed eggplant, summer squash, tomatoes, onions, herbs, and garlic. (In fall, the Stufflebeam's are famous for turning excess cranberries into [Carina's Rosemary Persimmon Cranberry Sauce](#).)

When tomatoes are in season, Vowell says, "We don't cook them, we don't process them, we don't peel them." They put the whole tomatoes in bags and put the bags in the freezer. "When they come out, you run them under warm water. The peel slips right off." Cut out the core, and you're ready to add the taste of fresh tomatoes to whatever is cooking. "You could still make gazpacho, or make stew and have that bright, tangy flavor," she says.

At Crum's Heirlooms, Deb Crum says, "We freeze kale. Especially for smoothies and morning drinks, frozen kale just powders right into it." She cleans, stems, and blanches the kale quickly, followed by an ice bath. Once dried, it's bagged and frozen. Frozen kale is also good in soups, "especially if you have young kids, who don't want to see a big leaf floating around." Crum's daughter-in-law sneaks frozen kale into spaghetti sauce and macaroni-and-cheese. "You can't really tell it's there," Crum says.

It has never been easier to cook with the seasons. At Chicago's Green City Market, chefs work with farmers to present workshops on cooking what's in season. The chefs also contribute to the market's farm-hearted [recipe page](#). The Carrboro farmers' market, in North Carolina, has curated a long page of [recipes](#). Bookstores carry farmers' market cookbooks. Southern Living Magazine has a bookmark-worthy archive of [49 summer market recipes](#). Author Mark Bittman and the *New York Times* created an online [Farmers' Market Recipe Generator](#). Pick by produce, herb or cooking method.

The season may be short on variety, but cooking with fresh produce from the farmers' market doesn't have to be boring. As Vowell observes, "The glut that's an overabundance turns into your opportunity to have much more interesting meals in the off-season."