

HOOKED

ON EATING LOCAL

When the garden gives up, a locavore goes ice fishing

BY JOHN HERSHEY



We locavores love to eat locally and seasonally, but these two concepts become mutually exclusive in the winter, at least for gardeners. My cold frame is a symbolic attempt to eat locally, if not seasonally, year round. But the arugula and lettuce grow so slowly on these short winter days that they're just conversation pieces, not food. They'll have a growth spurt in the spring, but until then I need some new sources of food, and that probably means animals.

Hunting is the obvious way to add DIY calories to my winter diet, but I'm a mild-mannered gardener. I feel a tinge of guilt when I kill and eat a carrot. And my one experience with hunting was traumatic. During a pleasant walk in the woods with my wife near her parents' cabin in upstate New York, we came upon my father-in-law just as he was murdering Bambi.

That's how it seemed to me at the time. Shaken by the shockingly loud rifle blast and the sight of a beautiful animal dying, I passed on the venison at dinner.

But like many locavores, my views of hunting have evolved. I eat meat, so I really can't object to it. I'm just not ready to do it. Fishing seems like a good entry-level carnivorous activity. It's not as noisy, for one thing. And you don't hear about that many fatal fishing accidents.

Since it's winter, my first thought was ice fishing. But ice fishing had always seemed like just an excuse to sit around and drink during the day. If you weren't sitting on a bucket in the middle of a lake in a howling wind, I used to think, maybe you wouldn't feel so much like drinking in the first place. As an aspiring winter locavore, I set out to discover if ice fishing has another purpose: actually catching fish to eat.

You'll find ice fishers on many lakes and reservoirs along the front range, including Chatfield, Cherry Creek, and Bear Creek. My wife

Henry Hershey, age 9

Photo by John Hershey

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and kids, who are very good sports, agreed to spend a day with me on Evergreen Lake.

If you'd like to drop a line through the ice yourself, the Colorado Division of Wildlife (<http://wildlife.state.co.us>) provides good information and safety tips. The main thing to remember is that the expression used by parents everywhere to describe dangerous situations—"You're on thin ice, mister!"—has a sound basis in fact. My other concern was the expense of special equipment. If I have to buy a big drill just to catch a few fish, I thought, that doesn't augur a cost-effective fishing experience.

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Our fellow fisherpersons were friendly and eager to chat, as you might expect people who have been alone for hours on a frozen lake to be, and they probably would have let me borrow tackle or use the big hand-crank auger to drill a fishin' hole. Although the guy nearby who kept sneaking sips from a bottle in a paper bag didn't offer to share. But rather than drill a new one, we found holes made by previous anglers, kicked through the thin crust of ice and dropped in a line.

I won't keep you in suspense any longer: I didn't catch any fish. But that was only because the other people kept catching them before they had a chance to swim by my hook, which seemed rather un-sportsmanlike.

All around us, trout were being hauled in. So the result of my investigation is that ice fishing can produce a decent amount of local food. Our licenses entitled us to take four fish. For me, the applicable limits were imposed by my skill rather than the law. But we watched many anglers arrive, catch their limit, and leave.

Even though the fish were in no danger from me, I got something out of the experience. It got me thinking beyond the plant kingdom to the many other opportunities for us amateurs and urbanites to produce

some of our own food. Some, like keeping chickens for eggs and bees for honey, involve symbiotic relationships with animals. Hunting and fishing are a bit more adversarial. So there's something for everyone. And it occurred to me, out there on the lake, that all these activities have one thing in common besides producing food: fun.

Yes, local eating is about carbon footprints, nutrition and taste. But we also grow veggies, catch fish, and shop at farmers' markets for the joy of being in the fresh air and sunshine, away from the stresses of modern life. I think that deliberately making a basic survival activity like eating more difficult in order to add fun to it is part of what it is to be human.

Even ice fishing is fun. I admit from the shore it looked dull, and I had with me two of the most sensitive boredom detectors known to science: a 9-year-old boy and a 5-year-old boy. Yet after three hours, I had to drag them off the ice. Despite our lack of success, they wanted to keep fishing. And there were plenty of other fun things to do that were invisible to the adult eye: hack away at the ice with a hatchet, skate in snow boots, try to slide chunks of ice into distant unused fishing holes (I'll bet the sport of curling was invented by bored Scottish ice fishermen). I kept expecting to look up from my line and see them bobbing in a fishing hole for the apples we brought as snacks. Imagine how rewarding the day would have been if we had had all this fun and also caught a few trout for supper.

According to scientific studies, if not my personal experience, gardening with kids makes them more likely to eat vegetables. It works with fishing too: Kids will eat healthy fish if they have fun helping to bring it to the table. How do I know? I tested the theory: We stopped at Whole Foods on the way home, and they helped me pick out a beautiful rainbow trout.

John Hershey is a gardener, beekeeper and perhaps someday a hunter. To read more wacky misadventures in local eating, visit rakiswhit.com.