



# FARMER'S JOURNAL DEEP INTO WINTER AT BLUESTEM FARM

BY MARY BROWER

It is the time of year of late dawns and clear nights of great beauty, of forking hay down the chute to the animals, of breaking the ice out of the troughs and watching snow rise around the barns like a tide. It is the time of year when the color green can make me physically hungry, and when I can find myself wondering if the circle feels so small because it actually is.

Of course there is also the brightness of the human light shed by people in places that experience big winters. But as anyone who's ever had a winter life outdoors can tell you, it's hard to think of doing any of it without the gifts of physical warmth that material things—from wool to wood and good food—bring us.

Back in the winter of 2000, my husband, Aaron, and I were living in Juneau, Alaska. There, in response to the fears of a global meltdown that came along with Y2K, many Alaskans mocked the idea of a collapse by trading things like votive candles and black bear jerky among friends. Despite that pilgrim spirit, quality of life for most Alaskans depended then as now on consumer goods churned out by the advanced distribution system responsible for bringing us everything from good long underwear to tropical houseplants and fresh eggs all year. With a ubiquity that made them seem at once essential and invisible, these things helped us go through life feeling self-sufficient without ever having to notice the numerous material ironies that surrounded us.

And so it was that the anti-disaster of Y2K came and went. A couple years later we found ourselves sitting on our backpacks in Mexico's Copper Canyon, having just helped deliver a truckload of



building supplies to a Tarahumara village so remote it was accessible only by footbridge. Many of the village residents wore shoes—if they wore shoes at all—made of recycled car tires, and their clothes were homespun, fashioned after the style of the conquistadors who'd impacted their culture so dramatically many hundreds of years before.

Now I don't claim to understand what it means to live in a context of centuries-old rural poverty, but for me those two places—the village in the canyon and the Alaskan capital on the eve of the millennium—came to stand for the polar contrast between what it means to live, as opposed to what it means to **think** you live, beyond the margins of the global economy. I trace our decision to become farmers to that moment.

Several months after that visit to the canyon, after a season of filing paperwork with consulates, we arrived in St. Petersburg, Russia, unable to speak much Russian. We were headed to a farming village three hours northeast of the city, on the banks of a river named after its mosquitoes. It was February. In many ways the countryside of northwestern Russia at the turn of the 21st century could have mirrored that of Northern Michigan 100 years ago. Common sights: country people on foot carrying tin milk cans on yokes across their shoulders, hand-piled haystacks buried in snow at the edges of unfenced fields. No-tech root cellars dotted the countryside, people carried children and groceries and bundles of wood around on sleds, and even apartment-dwellers kept piles of winter squash and potatoes in the cold spaces under their beds. Electricity was intermittent, and a certain degree of magic enveloped the village's one unreliable telephone, which didn't work when the sun shone too hard or the clouds were too heavy overhead. There, in the largest country in the world, in the early years of the 21st century, the closest **faulty** Internet connection was a walk across the frozen river and a trainride away.

On periodic visits to that world of modern communications, then, we often stopped in at the local grocery market for caramels, which a clerk weighed out by the kilo. Except in the more affluent neighborhoods of bigger towns, shops carried just a few basic sundries. Besides candy, the underside of the glass countertop in that rural store only held some fatty sausages and a pretty good selection of vodka and beer. The residents of bigger towns and cities had far more options, but not of foods that country people expected to live on. Though many Russians had a special distaste for the kind of agriculture forced on them through several generations of communism, there was nevertheless a deep tradition—born partly of the very broken nature of Russian capitalism, born partly of a national obsession for growing food at modest summer cabins called *dachas*—of home gardening.

In a country with winters so reliably cold that people wore winter shoes made entirely of felt (no rubberized soles required), almost everyone kept a garden, and that garden was meant to provide a significant portion of the household's food, both in summer and winter. In the village where we lived, we only needed to purchase a few outside supplies—mainly sugar, flour, oil and soap—

Photos by Mary Brouer



and found we did very well instead on what we could grow, fish, raise and forage. As a model of the good life in a post-industrial society, it wasn't so bad.

I'm sure my husband and I owe plenty of our attitudes and beliefs about farming to those formative years we spent in Russia. We strive to provide as close to a full diet from our farm as possible. Besides protein from animals, we also focus on hardy vegetables. We harvest some of those in late fall and store them through winter, but we also grow extra-hardy vegetables like sunchokes and rutabagas that are content to wait in the earth for the passing of the whitest months. Still other vegetables like kale, Brussels sprouts and leeks can be harvested from under the snow each week as needed. Though ground temperatures are relatively warm beneath the snow's insulation, we still need to wait until the mercury rises somewhere near freezing before we can pick these crops or they'd freeze when they came into contact with the air. When thaws aren't happening fast enough for our harvests, or when we want cover from an approaching snowstorm, we've found we just need to drag our small, lightweight hoopouses out onto the field, and they help bump the air temperature up to where we need it.

We're still working out some big questions about our main hoopouses, though. Aaron and I have always farmed in cold places, but on some of the colder and snowier days of January and December, I've found my husband poring over weather maps of places we used to live, dismayed to find that the coldest parts of winter here have been harsher than Siberia. And because our long, overcast winters give us so little sun and so much snow, there are whole months of the year when



An heirloom variety of daikon radishes, watermelon radishes are a stunning rosy color inside. They're sweeter than ordinary salad radishes, and add wonderful color to winter dishes. This recipe features watermelon radishes in the starring role.

## WATERMELON RADISH SALAD

*From Bluestem Farm*

- 1/3 cup olive oil
- 3 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 1/2 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- salt and pepper
- 1 pound watermelon radishes

In a medium-sized, pretty bowl, mix the oil, vinegar, mustard, salt and pepper to make the vinaigrette.

The salad will be made of paper-thin, wide slices of radish, and there are a couple of ways to achieve this. A mandoline, if you have one, is probably fastest. You can also cut the radishes in half, lay them on the flat side, and use a sharp knife to shave off thin slices. But if you want the effect of the thinnest, most transparent slices, use a vegetable peeler to pare paper-thin slices from the half radish. Toss the radish slices in the dressing and chill in the refrigerator for a couple of hours. Try this salad alongside simple sandwiches of dark bread and cheese.

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the greenhouse effect doesn't work so well—even in a greenhouse. On a cold, cloudy day, despite triple or quadruple layers of the best agricultural fabric money can buy, it's often colder in there than under three feet of snow out in the elements.

Choosing to be a winter farmer means getting really comfortable with the idea that every disadvantage is also a potential advantage; and for now, our challenge seems to be using the environment to our advantage. It is comforting to remember that we are only at the beginning of that project. When real winter came early to our farm and we didn't get everything out of the ground in time, we had to content ourselves with the project of pulling vegetables out of snowbanks. We remembered that if we lived in a milder location with less snow, we might be contending with ground frozen solid and rows of spoiled food. Instead we get the velvet, unexpected smell of fresh earth underneath its deep layer of snowy insulation, not to mention the minor miracle of frost-sweetening in the leeks, carrots, sunchokes and rutabagas that we dig up.

Farming is an intensely creative venture and, during midwinter, farmers everywhere are working hard and making plans, drawing up seed orders and chick orders, calculating supply needs, figuring out how to make things work and deciding how to pay for it. At our place, we're constantly sketching up diagrams, maps and schemes for new egg-washing, food storage, pasture and housing systems, and as a new farm we're working to find solutions to our constantly evolving questions on the best ways to provide food for our community throughout the year.

What becomes increasingly clear to us as we settle into our home in Northern Michigan is that our region can and should do better in terms of full four-season farming. For even the most essential and immediate goods, like food, we're nearly as dependent as Alaska on long-distance shipments from elsewhere. And though no one's suggesting that people in our part of North America are about to be wearing shoes made out of car tires, something as simple as an ice storm or trucking strike could damage the supply chain enough to impact what might be able to make it all the way up here when we need it.

Without becoming Russian *dachnik* gardeners and dedicating our entire summers to the project, there's no reason why most of us can't plant a few vegetables here and there and give home food storage a try. Potatoes, onions and winter squash store just fine in unheated closets, unfinished basements and the other colder parts of our houses without any special treatment. By trying to eat more seasonally and by making a point of visiting farmers' markets not just from June through October, we can encourage more farmers to grow food beyond the margins of the high season, moving the needle just a little further toward sustainability throughout the year. *eGT*

*This essay is part of a series of articles on local farming by Mary Brower. Mary and her husband, Aaron, own Bluestem Farm, a four-season community farm in East Jordan that offers a build-your-own winter CSA program that runs through March 2014. Learn more about the vibrant community around Bluestem Farm at [BluestemFarm.net](http://BluestemFarm.net).*



The art of eating well in season means highlighting the ingredients available this time of year. Sunchoke, also known as Jerusalem artichokes, bear no relation to the European green vegetable called the artichoke. Native to the Americas, not the Levant, this tuber grows at the root of a giant sunflower plant. The name “Jerusalem artichoke” came from a corruption of the Spanish word for sunflower, *girasole*.

Sunchokes are one of the hardiest hardy vegetables we know of. You can harvest them with a pickaxe, frozen hard from the frozen earth, and they won't turn to mush when you get them indoors. Resembling fresh ginger, crunchier than potatoes, sunchokes can be substituted raw for water chestnuts in stir-fries or substituted for potatoes in soups, stews and frittatas.

They're also nutritionally quite dense, containing three times the iron as broccoli, a good amount of potassium and respectable levels of vitamins B and C. But perhaps their most outstanding nutritional characteristic is that, unlike potatoes and many other root vegetables, they are not composed primarily of starch, but rather the dietary fiber called inulin. Because inulin is largely indigestible to us, sunchokes are an acceptable root vegetable for diabetics and anyone who's trying to avoid carbs.

And, while we can't digest inulin ourselves, the probiotics that live in our gut can, and do. Thus, sunchokes feed our intestinal flora, and eating them—cooked or raw—is a great way to support our digestive health.

That said, sunchokes probably do merit a word of warning: Because their inulin provides a feast for gut microbes, sunchokes, like beans, make some people gassy. Give them a test drive at home before serving them at a dinner party.

## SUNCHOKE SOUP

*From Bluestem Farm*

- 2 leeks, chopped and rinsed
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 smoked ham hock, about 2 pounds
- 2 pounds sunchokes
- salt
- ½ cup strained yogurt

Chop and then soak the leeks for a moment in a bowl of cold water, then drain and shake them dry—this is the surest way to make sure you don't get any sand in your soup. In a 3-quart soup pot, sauté the chopped leeks and onions in the butter until they wilt.

When you're happy with the onions, add the ham hock and about 2 quarts of water to the pot. Simmer for about four hours, until the meat is tender and the broth is glossy. Remove the hock and set aside. Add the coarsely chopped sunchokes to the pot, simmer until they are soft, then purée the soup with an immersion blender.

Chop the meat from the hock and add it back to the puréed soup. Adjust the salt to taste, and serve the soup with a dollop of thick, strained yogurt. Easy. So good.



Photo by Mary Brouer