Paul Waddington

About the Book

Why is lamb perfect one month, but not lobster? When should you choose strawberries and not blackberries? And why should you choose this potato over that?

Our lives were once intimately entwined with the seasons. Survival depended on our knowing when to plant, when to harvest, and how to dry, salt, smoke, preserve and store. We celebrated the seasons, and because we knew how to take advantage of them we ate food at its best.

Written with relish, *Seasonal Food* sets out to restore this crucial knowledge, explaining what food is good now with a month-by-month guide. It includes culinary history, notes for preserving and storing, supplier advice and, new for this edition and in response to a growing sophistication in seasonal eating in the UK, it features gourmet foods that you can't source locally. Discover when to get the finest nectarines or the best month to treat yourself to Vacherin cheese.

So much more than a recipe book or a directory, *Seasonal Food* is the essential companion for all food enthusiasts.

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Title Page
Dedication
Epigraph
Acknowledgements
Preface
Introduction

Using this book

Seasonal food festivals in Britain

Month by month guide
- January
- February
- March
- April
- May
- June
- July
- August
- September
- October
- November
- December

Year planner

Further information and books
Index

About the Author

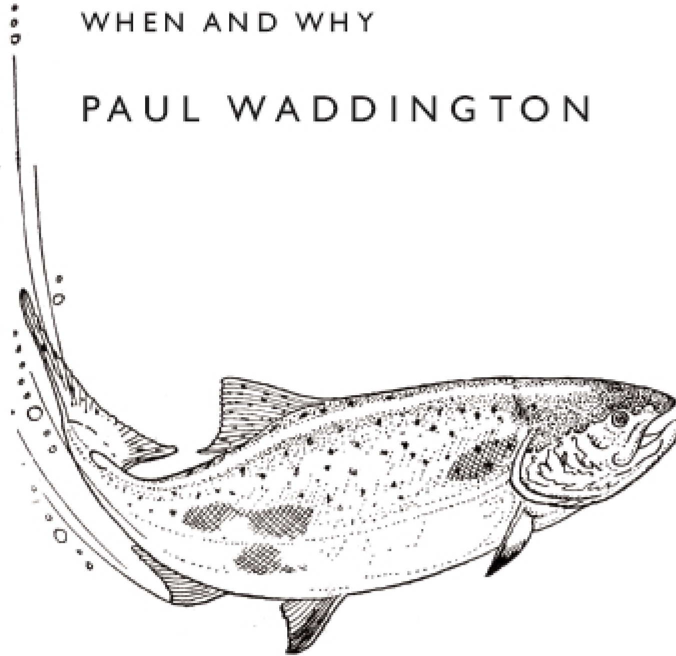
Also by Paul Waddington

Copyright

Seasonal Food

A GUIDE TO
WHAT'S IN SEASON
WHEN AND WHY

PAUL WADDINGTON



In memory of my mother and father

Is there anybody out there who doesn’t, in quiet moments, feel in his heart that the future lies in working with the grain of nature?

Tim Smit, Eden Project

The correspondence between good farming, good nutrition and great gastronomy is absolute, and wonderful.

Colin Tudge, ***So Shall We Reap***

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Preface

I think it started with asparagus. Our short, splendid asparagus season should be marked in the diaries of all British gourmets. But even though I'm a keen cook and food enthusiast, with kitchen shelves straining under the weight of the latest glossy cookbooks, I didn't know when it was. In fact, beyond some general notions of spring lamb and game in the autumn, I realized that I didn't know anything much about food's seasons. Was this normal? A few conversations with equally food-crazed contemporaries suggested it was. It seemed that unless you were a farmer, grower, food expert or over sixty, your awareness of what's in season when was about as extensive as mine.

This struck me as a serious gap in our knowledge. Despite a renaissance in British home cooking, coupled with a rediscovery of local produce through farmers' markets and enthusiastic celebrity chefs, many of us are missing some important information. What's the use of a fancy gooseberry recipe in November?

Of course there are references – like the baffling monthly tables of vegetables that sometimes feature in food books – and plenty of seasonally orientated cookbooks, from landmarks like Margaret Costa's *Four Seasons Cookery Book* to the River Café books. But none of these offers an easily digestible answer to simple questions such as 'What's good now?' or 'Is lamb good now?' Nor do they go on to explore why it's good, the answers to which can be both interesting and useful.

I wanted to know what was good to cook and eat without having to plough through pages of recipes. The more I read

and researched, the more I learned about the delightful cycle of seasonal food in Britain, and the more I realized that my dream reference book didn't exist.

So I had to write it. Asparagus, by the way, is here.

Introduction

Life in Britain was once intimately entwined with the seasons. Our survival depended on a wealth of skills we developed to take advantage of the growing cycle and to deal with the barren winter. We learned when to plant and harvest to ensure fresh food was available for as long as possible. We knew exactly when wild foods were ready for the taking. And we learned to dry, salt, smoke, preserve and store food to keep us going through the lean times, or to take advantage of abundance. Our year turned to a cycle that was driven by the seasons, with the last autumn harvests heralding the end of the old year and the beginning of the new.

For many of us today, technology has reduced the seasons to little more than an aesthetic distraction. Heating and air-conditioning keep us comfortable all year round. Refrigeration, high-technology storage and a globalized food market mean that we can eat whatever we want, whenever we want. The year follows very different rhythms: the school year, the tax year, the financial year.

As a result, what awareness we have of food's seasons is diminishing rapidly. It has arguably been on the wane for hundreds of years, since a series of land enclosures starting in the 1500s began to reduce the amount of common land on which small farmers and labourers could grow food and raise livestock for themselves. By the late eighteenth century, when enclosures accelerated, many had been forced off the land and into towns and cities, where, according to food historian Colin Spencer, 'under the slavery of long hours and pittance wages, their diet

declined to bread, jam, tea and sugar'. While we might think that junk food, far removed from nature's cycles, is a relatively recent phenomenon, it has in fact been a part of British life for hundreds of years.

As the first people to industrialize, Britons were the first to lose our connection with the land and the seasons. We regained it – albeit briefly, and under duress – in the Second World War, when the 'dig for victory' campaign had the whole nation growing its own food and in better health than at any other time in the twentieth century. After the war, though, the combination of agricultural subsidy and chemical farming severed this connection anew, and brought us to where we are today: a world of cheap, year-round abundance. So should we care about the relationship between food and the seasons when it is no longer a matter of life and death; when we (in Britain at least) can eat what we want, when we want?

I believe we should. For a start, there's the simple fact that food tastes better in season. From spring lamb to asparagus, from apples to wild salmon, fresh, local produce is better to eat than food that has been raised artificially, or that has travelled halfway around the world in a controlled-atmosphere container. There are straightforward reasons for this. Take tomatoes. They like to grow in rich, well-composted soil and need good strong sun to ripen properly. The flavour of a fine tomato is a result of the subtle interplay between nutritious soil and sunlight. So it should come as no surprise that 'fresh' tomatoes, planted in an artificial substrate and grown out of season in an air-conditioned greenhouse, taste of nothing much at all. Or take intensively farmed salmon, also available all year round. Fooled into growing by artificial light, drenched in chemicals, drugged up to the eyeballs and crammed into pens at densities of up to 20kg per cubic metre, they are not in good shape when they reach the supermarket. Wild fish, on the other hand, caught in season, have reached a

prime condition that results from a natural life cycle and are an infinitely superior product.

Of course we can get many foods all year round. But it's a treat and a privilege to eat them in season, because for much of the year many foods are not at their best.

Then there's the question of how sustainable our approach to food production and consumption is. Our 'year-round abundance' has carried a heavy price. The problems of industrial agriculture – from unhappy salmon to battery hens to pesticide-soaked vegetables – are well documented and have led to a surge in the sales of organic produce. This is to the good, because apart from giving us foods free from agrochemicals whose deleterious effects are thought to range from poorer child health to male infertility, organic production has many benefits. It promotes biodiversity and soil quality; it reduces the pollution of waterways and land. And most of the time it gives us food that is healthier, richer in nutrients and tastier.

But adherence to organic standards alone is not necessarily a sustainable way for us to produce food; nor does it guarantee a superior product. Flying in organic spring onions from Mexico and collecting them by car from a supermarket creates 300 times more CO_2 emissions than if they were grown locally and delivered by an organic box scheme. And they don't taste as good either.

In a world where man-made climate change is an urgent issue, what we eat is more than just a matter of taste. Buying in season encourages us to buy locally, whether from the farmers' market in town or the specialist sheep farmer who sells direct. Supermarkets may pride themselves on an ever-growing range of organic produce, but if a kilo of apples has made the flight from New Zealand in March, are they really going to taste as good as a well-stored late British variety? If you accept that human activity contributes to climate change, are the New Zealand

apples worth the kilo of CO_2 they will produce compared to the 50g if the same kilo were sourced locally? Despite the fact that we grow perhaps the best apples in the world, Britain has lost 60 per cent of its apple orchards since 1970, thanks in part to the bureaucratic madness that paid growers to dig them up. Buying locally and in season encourages local producers, who are building a more sustainable food industry, contributing to a renaissance in British produce and cuisine and creating a better environment.

Most of all, though, eating with the seasons brings a rich variety into our lives. Where’s the fun in eating the same things all year round? By being closely aware of what’s in season, you get twelve months’ worth of gastronomic treats, and satisfying answers to the perpetual question of what to buy and cook for yourself, family and friends. Today, the nearest thing to a seasonal gastronomic event in Britain is the annual consumption of an oversized fowl accompanied by miniature cabbages, about both of whose qualities many have, at best, ambivalent feelings.

The seasons have much more to offer than this. British produce gives us a huge range of reasons to celebrate throughout the year. From the autumnal abundance of fruit, game and vegetables to the spring treats of lamb, fresh greens and mackerel, there is (almost) always something good, fresh and locally produced for us to enjoy.

However, unless we are enthusiasts, farmers, or live close to rural tradition, many of us have only a vestigial awareness of what’s in season when. Regaining this knowledge is not easy. Chefs and food professionals tend to keep it to themselves, occasionally giving away tempting titbits in their recipes: ‘And now, of course, is the perfect time to eat lobster!’ Why? How do they know this? How do we get to know this stuff?

The purpose of this book is to put comprehensive knowledge of food's seasons back in the hands of people who buy food. It's not a recipe book – there are plenty of those already. *Seasonal Food* is a guidebook to what's in season when and why in Britain, so that you can eat produce at its best, contribute to a renaissance in local production, and simply revel in the variety of the seasons.

The seasons and their influence on food

Seasons start with the sun, the great fuel source that powers all of life on Earth. Its heat and light stimulate plants to grow and to convert its energy into food for themselves and the creatures that feed on them. Together with the seas, the land masses, the atmosphere and the planet's spin, the sun drives the weather systems that also determine where things can live and thrive.

But all of this highly complex interaction doesn't, on its own, give us the seasons. Our annual cycle of weather comes from two simple accidents of creation.

The first is that our planet's axis is gently tilted at a 23.5° angle. Without this, there would be no seasons in Britain, or perhaps seasons so extreme as to render the place uninhabitable. As it is, the angle of our annual procession around the sun means that its rays hit our hemisphere more directly for half the year, while for the rest of the time the southern half of the globe benefits. This gives us the annual variations in temperature and length of day to which our flora and fauna have had to adapt.

The second accident of creation is that we are fortunate enough to have a large, nearby moon that holds our axis reasonably steady in the face of gravitational assault from the sun and the planet Jupiter. Without the moon, which we also have to thank for tides and a host of other effects on natural systems, our 23.5° tilt (which still varies slightly

over long periods of time) would swing wildly and give us chaotic, unpredictable, probably life-threatening weather.

So two happy cosmic accidents have conspired to give us a stable progression of seasons that have created the variety in nature's activity that we see in Britain today. But what are the seasons and when do they happen?

The answer is not as obvious as one might think. The *astronomical* seasons simply follow Earth's orbit, suggesting that winter and summer start at the solstices on 21 December and 21 June; and that spring and autumn begin at the equinoxes (21 March and 21 September). However, it is obvious to all of us that although they are the times of the strongest and weakest solar radiation, the summer and winter solstices do not represent the extremes of the seasons; nor are the equinoxes the depths of spring and autumn.

The main reason for this is something called 'heat lag'. Land heats up and cools down more slowly than air; and water more slowly still. So because land and sea are still heating up or cooling down after the solstices, the hottest and coldest days tend to be around a month later. And because Britain's climate is so strongly influenced by the sea, the lag can be even longer, with a two-week difference between inland and coastal locations. Boosted by the Gulf Stream, the Atlantic's winter warmth gives Devon and Cornwall mean temperatures in January that compare favourably with the French Riviera.

And if you thought there were four seasons, think again. Meteorologists prefer to talk of five separate seasons that are characterized not only by temperature but also by the different weather types that prevail at different times of the year. *Early winter* (rain, wind, storms) runs from late November to early February; *late winter* (less rain) from February to March; *spring and early summer* (lowest rainfall) from April to early June; *high summer* (warm southerly winds, lots of rain) from June to early September;

and *autumn* (high pressure, mists) from September to late November.

The most obvious way in which these seasons affect food is in the growing cycle of plants. Below 6°C, plants are ‘resting’ and they can begin growing again only when the average temperature rises above this level. In Britain, this threshold is reached at different points depending on a combination of factors: how far south you are, how close to the Atlantic, and how high up. In practice, this has meant that the start of the growing season sweeps up the country from Cornwall in the south-west around 14 February, and then northwards and upwards until growth finally kicks off in the high ground of northern England and Scotland on 1 April. Climate change (of which more later) is now changing these dates.

If we want to see how the seasons are really organized in relation to food, however, a look back in time is instructive. Traditional pre-Christian Celtic festivals were tied both to the astronomical calendar, with four celebrations occurring at the solstices and equinoxes, and to the cycle of growth, with another four that related to significant moments in the life of the land. On 31 October Samhain, now known as Hallowe’en, marked the end of the last harvests and the beginning of a new annual cycle. Imbolc, which was held on 2 February, marked the reawakening of the land and was associated with lambing and the appearance of early flowers. Beltane, more commonly celebrated as May Day, was an earthy celebration of the blooming fertility that was all around in nature. And on 1 August, Lughnasadh or Lammas (the latter from Saxon words meaning ‘loaf festival’) marked the first harvests and a celebration of plenty.

The food chain, like the seasons, starts with the sun’s energy. Plants convert it into carbohydrates, oils and proteins that enable them to grow and provide the food source on which all other creatures depend. The heat of the

sun determines when this process starts, then acts as a ‘volume control’, with greater warmth creating a greater rate of plant development. The cold of winter also acts as a stimulant to growth, providing an ‘on’ switch for plants such as winter wheat, parsnips and sugar beet. The sun’s light acts as a trigger for the growth of other plants that wait for a critical length of daylight before they come into flower.

Animals, birds, insects and fish set their calendars according to the seasonal larder, breeding, migrating or hibernating to take advantage of abundance or cope with shortages. In some cases they act as the servants of the plants. Flowers and blossoms, for example, are not colourful in order to please humans but rather to coerce insects into pollinating them and rendering them fertile. Fruit plays a similarly gentle trick, appealing to the appetites of creatures who unwittingly spread its seeds together with a healthy dollop of fertilizer. All of this has meant that many wild fauna have also developed a pronounced seasonality, raising young in the spring and fattening themselves for winter in the abundant autumn, at which time their more systematic predators (us) have the best chance of a seasonal meal.

Creatures that are now domesticated for farming and have no real seasonality, even if raised organically, were once eaten according to a seasonal rhythm. Unable to feed their cattle and pigs over the barren winter, our ancestors slaughtered all except those kept for breeding and labour at Martinmas (11 November) and set about preserving the meats. Two periods of fasting (Advent and Lent) were conveniently slotted into this hungry time. With the introduction of fodder crops such as turnips in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, livestock could be fed over the winter and therefore largely lost their seasonality.

Overall, though, the seasons have had an enormous influence on what we eat, not only in terms of when we can eat it but also in the skills and techniques we developed to ensure a healthy year-round diet. Salting, smoking, pickling, preserving and bottling were all developed largely to take advantage of seasonal abundance and lay down stores for the lean times. Today, our high-tech, globalized food market has rendered many of these techniques unnecessary. But without the seasons, we might not have smoked ham. What a loss that would be!

Will the seasons stay where they are? Even the most urbanized adult Briton cannot have failed to notice that things are getting warmer. The Central England Temperature series – the longest available instrumental record of temperature in the world – shows average temperatures in Britain dating back to 1659. It reveals a gradual warming trend starting from the time of mid-nineteenth century industrialization, then a sharp upward trend through the 1990s, the warmest decade on record.

By 2100, UK average temperatures are predicted to rise between 1°C and 5°C. Because of the climate's complexity, it is difficult to predict exactly how such warming will affect our seasons. For example, a 1.5°C rise in temperature is the equivalent of moving south 200–300km or losing 200m of height. In theory, this would mean growing crops in the north of England that are currently grown mainly in the south, such as maize and sweetcorn. This change can already be seen in agriculture: from 1985 to 1999, the area of vineyards cultivated in the UK more than doubled. We will have a longer growing season (running from 28 January to 22 December, the year 2000's was the longest on record), with a year-round growing season not far away. But we may have drier summers and wetter winters, which will influence what can be grown. And if, as some suggest, melting icecaps slow or stop the Gulf Stream, then, ironically, global warming will give Britain a more

continental climate, with severe winters and shorter, hotter summers.

So the seasons are changing. But then they always were. Whatever happens to the climate, as long as the planet stays at its 23.5° angle, we in Britain will still have an annual variation in what can be grown, raised and eaten locally. Keeping track of this, in order to eat food that is both at its best and produced sustainably, will always be worth the effort.

Favourite foods from shortage and glut

Living by seasonal produce alone would be tough. It's something that only a true hunter-gatherer could lay claim to doing, and it is many thousands of years since such a lifestyle prevailed in Britain. We've used agriculture to 'cheat' the seasons for a long time now, growing surpluses that can be stored to provide staples through the lean months, or herding animals to ensure a constant food source. In recent years, of course, we have also used technology to cheat the seasons: canning, freezing, irradiating and air-freighting food to ensure an uninterrupted, year-round supply.

Our ancestors did not have access to such preserving techniques; nor, for a long time, did they understand the biological processes that cause food to spoil. It was probably by trial, error and happy accident that 'traditional' methods of preserving food, such as pickling, salting, smoking, drying and sealing were discovered. These practices did not arise solely because of seasonal variation in supply. The religious observance of meat-free days, for example, drove a demand for salted and dried cod. Potting, which involves cooking food then sealing it in a container, also helped to protect foods when they were transported. Pickled cabbage – commonly known as sauerkraut – was famously a protection against scurvy on

long sea voyages because the preserving process retains the vegetable's vitamin C content. Captain Cook took 19,000lb of sauerkraut on his voyages and lost not a single man to the disease.

What distinguishes these traditional preserving techniques from their modern descendants, however, is that they change the taste of the food that is being preserved, often for the better. In some cases, they create food that has become of enormous significance for different societies. Salt cod, for example, is little more than a curiosity for most British people, but the Portuguese hold it in high esteem. Pickled cabbage is an important dish for Germans, Koreans and French from the Alsace region; but many elsewhere find the idea decidedly unpleasant (yet often change their minds after a taste). The Swedes are unique in their passion for fermented herring, whose powerful smell is famous for repelling all other nationalities. Buried, rotted shark is treasured in Iceland. And, astonishing though it may seem to those for whom it is an integral part of their national identity, much of the world is ignorant of the pleasures of bacon, perhaps the finest preserved food of all.

Preserving has therefore created iconic foods; and the need to preserve has, at least in part, arisen from the effect of the seasons on the supply of food. Driven by the challenge of maintaining a nutritious and interesting diet throughout the year, our forebears created foods that remain central to the way we eat today, even if their origin is long forgotten.

The seasonal pig

Bacon has no seasonality today; nor indeed do any of the products of the British pig, except for the smallholder or specialist breeder. Yet pigs used to be a crucial part of the annual cycle in Britain, with bacon the longest-lasting and

therefore most treasured product of the beast. Pigs had an incredibly useful role in the peasant economy. Even more omnivorous than humans, pigs convert almost any food, and food waste, into fine meat and high-quality manure. Traditionally, they were fattened through the year and killed in the autumn to provide a supply of protein, flavour and fat through the winter. (Although fat today seems something either to be avoided or embraced completely, depending on one's fad diet of choice, to our peasant forebears it was an essential ingredient to provide energy to combat the rigours of the leaner months.) Before slaughter, the pigs' diet – and their quality – was improved by a final feast of windfall apples, acorns and beech mast; pigs are woodland creatures at heart. But as Dorothy Hartley points out in *Food in England*, they could provide much more than just food for the winter: 'A pig killed in November would still provide fresh meat and brawn and pie till Christmas, and ham, bacon and lardie cakes for an entire year.'

Pig meat may indeed be valuable, but it spoils easily, so quick work and careful techniques are required to get the most out of it. The blood, guts and offal were dealt with first, creating delicacies such as black puddings, sausages, chitterlings (cooked intestines) and faggots, all of which helped to eke out for a few weeks the bits of the pig that would otherwise go off too quickly. Other parts, in particular the sides and haunches, were preserved by salting (and maybe smoked as well) to keep for much longer as ham and bacon. The latter, in a large piece or 'flitch', would be hung from the ceiling or high in the fireplace: smoke acts as a deterrent to insects, forms an antiseptic seal on the meat's surface and, of course, imparts an extra note to the flavour. For poor families in rural Ireland, bacon was such a luxury that it gave rise to a dish jokingly called 'potatoes and point', whereby the

potato was merely pointed at the priceless bacon in the hope that it might take on some of its flavour.

The presence of a side of bacon excited particular passion in the mightily passionate William Cobbett, whose *Cottage Economy* of 1821 was an attempt to give back to the labouring classes the skills in self-sufficiency that the industrial revolution had taken from them. He saw a flitch of bacon – providing alluring, wholesome food and flavour through hard winter months – as a much better guarantor of domestic and social harmony than any amount of religious observance. Cobbett's passion was driven by the depredations of both industrialization and land enclosures. In drastically reducing the amount of common land on which animals could be grazed and run, enclosures eventually made it difficult for poor rural families to keep livestock for their own use; and legislation aimed at urban rather than rural hygiene made it harder still. By 1750, a few thousand landowners owned much of the land in Britain. Together with industrialization, the social changes wrought by this upheaval are seen as largely responsible for the decline of peasant cuisine in Britain, to the point where today we revere the earthy rural cuisines of France and Italy in preference to our own.

We didn't forget bacon, though. It's no longer a seasonal food, for which we should be thankful; but we have the seasons to thank for the salting and smoking that brought it to us. The contemporary bacon buyer should choose carefully. Of all the foods for which it is worth paying a premium to ensure a wholesome product that is the result of good husbandry, bacon should be at the top of the list. Much bacon is cured in an industrialized process in which the meat is injected with brine and preservatives, creating a waterlogged and inferior product. And the taste of 'smoked' bacon sometimes comes from 'liquid smoke', an artificial flavouring also used, for example, to flavour crisps. Most significantly, industrial-scale pig production is