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Seasons' Delights

Everyone loves Maine's specialty foods, but timing is key. Seize the day with our 2012 gourmet calendar. BY JUDITH GAINES

May

Bright green **fiddleheads** are another glory of Maine's spring. These ferns usually are at their peak for two or three weeks in May.



They're named for the ram because of their powerful, funky flavor and because they first appear under the sign of Aries, the ram: March 21 to April 20. But in Maine, **ramps** are most commonly found in mid-to-late May or early June. Hunt for them in forested areas with rich, moist soil and lots of maple trees.



Tart, tangy **rhubarb** comes in the spring. "But it's sweeter if



you wait a few weeks," says Violet Willis, who raises this pie favorite at her farm in Denysville. She recommends enjoying it in late May or early June.

January

Don't miss Maine's phenomenal **diver scallops**, available this year through March 31.



While the growing season is months away, there's always a hunting season. From October to March, pack your gear and head into the woods for **snowshoe hare**. Don't have a recipe? Pan-fry the meat with onions and thyme for a hot winter meal. And if you prefer a flying shot, snow geese are available to hunt from October to the end of January.

Similarly, **mussels** and **clams** are at their peak in fall and winter. The flavor of **Jonah crabs** doesn't change much year-round, but they're easier to find from August to November, when they crawl into lobster traps and are caught that way.



February

When you can buy the silvery shad and its delicious roe in Maine is notoriously hard to predict. "It's up to the fish, not the calendar," says Ben Alfiero, owner of the Harbor Fish Market on Portland's Custom House Wharf. He's had **shad roe** as early as February and as late as June, he says. Start looking now.



Martha Putnam of Farm Fresh Connection says, "harvest **leeks** in spring. They become extra sweet due to the cold, particularly **blue solaise**, the French heirloom leek."

June

Sweet, crisp **sugar snap peas** are a favorite at farmers' markets across Maine. Look for them in June or early July.



You might think that milk would be the same at any time. Not so, though, if you enjoy fresh, unhomogenized **milk** from a local dairy. For much of the year, these cows eat hay. But throughout the summer and especially in June, when pastures are the most lush, the milk "gets a beautiful golden color from all the beta carotene in the grass," says Jessica Zanoni, who sells fresh raw milk from her Olde Sow Farm in Lubec. The clover and native grasses on which the cows graze also add their flavor to the milk, which aficionados savor. Butter made from this milk is

more complex, with a deeper orange-gold color. Many of the most buttery and grassy-tasting cheeses also are best made now—such as Debbie Hahn's Eleanor Buttercup.



March

Maple syrup is good any time of year, but it's fun to visit a farm when sap is being turned into syrup. The best time for this is Maine Maple Sunday—March 25, 2012—when maple farms across the state invite the public to join in this traditional rite of spring. Find a participating farm and "sugaring-off" event near you at mainemapleproducers.com.



April

With a brief season determined by the catch amount, the baby eels called **elvers** are caught in April either by hand or using a long, funnel shaped net called a fyke. "They're used a lot in higher-end restaurants, and they're great flash fried in Asian dishes," says Browne Trading Company's Chris Miller. "Unfortunately they suffer from supply-and-demand. For around \$150, you'll get about a thousand elvers in a pound."



Tasty little **smelts** are at their peak just after "ice-out," (which can happen any time from March to May), when they run up Maine's tidal estuaries.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: FILE; DISH EMILY LEWIS; NOMINOMINO; INA GARTEN/THE BAREFOOT CONTESSA COOKBOOK; CLARKSON POTTER, 1999; TIM NAUMAN; HUNGRY TRAVELERS.COM; FILE (2); BEAVER MEADOW AUDUBON CENTER; FRANKPICCHIONE.COM; D. SIKES/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; FILE; COURTESY CHEBEAUGUE ISLAND INN/KRISTIN TIEG PHOTOGRAPHY





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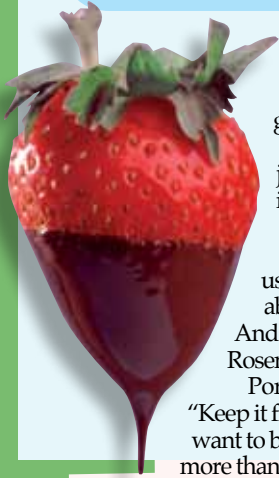
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You can use diced **scapes** in stir-fry, pesto, soups, pasta and in most dishes that call for garlic. Look for them at farmers' markets and fresh vegetable stands around the state.



For a brief period in mid-July, **garlic** bulbs send up a curling green shoot with a small white flower on the tip. If the flower is allowed to bloom, this diminishes the growth and flavor of the garlic—and many large growers just throw them away. But the garlic scape, as its known, has a tantalizingly mild, garlic-leek flavor that is developing a cult following.



Strawberry growers say the best time to enjoy their berries is the first week in July, although they usually are available by late June.

And Joe Fournier of Rosemont Market in Portland suggests, "Keep it fresh. You don't want to buy any that are more than two days old."

While **raspberries** will peak from July to August, he says **blackberries** will last a little longer, until September. "They can be more robust, tougher."

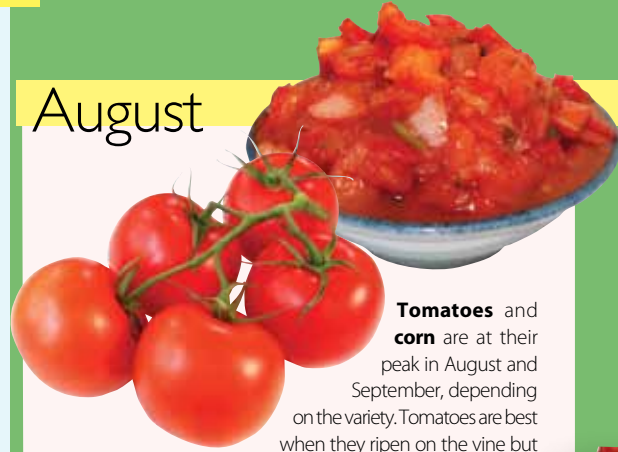
Maine's **wild blueberry** harvest begins around the 9th of August and continues through about the third week in September. "I'd say they'll be at their peak around August 20," says Marie Emerson, who owns Wild Blueberry Land, in Columbia Falls. DownEast Maine produces 85 percent of the world's wild blueberries.



Wild mushrooms "don't follow the field guides," says David Spahr, Maine's so-called "Mushroom Maniac," who forages for them and has written extensively about this. Look for black trumpets, the tasty "poor man's truffle," from mid-July through August; spicy **chanterelles** in August; **hedgehogs** from the end of July through October; nutty **maitakes** (hen of the woods) in mid-September; and earthy, aromatic **matsutakes** from early September to early October, he advises. Find them at farmers markets or www.oystercreekmushroom.com/wild.html.



August



Tomatoes and **corn** are at their peak in August and September, depending on the variety. Tomatoes are best when they ripen on the vine but will continue to ripen after

they're picked—if they're not refrigerated—and often are still good even a couple of weeks later. Never refrigerate a good tomato. Corn, on the other hand, should be eaten on the day it's picked. Once it's picked, its sugars turn to starch and both the flavor and texture decline immediately.

When to find the best **lobster** "is a tricky question," says Dane Somers, executive director of the Maine Lobster Council. In July and August, Maine lobsters molt. Many people choose these **soft-shelled** crustaceans because they're easier to handle and their meat is especially tender and sweet. On the other hand, Somers says, when the lobster regrows its **hard shell**, "it makes one that is bigger than before, so it can grow into it. This means that in October and November, lobsters are filling out. They're more meaty with a somewhat stronger flavor," which some prefer.



For best timing, try **land-locked salmon** mid-to-late summer.



September

To enjoy **Apples** at their absolute best, "There's nothing like picking them straight from the tree," says Rod Bailey, who grows more than 50 varieties at his Whitefield orchard. The best picking time is mid-September to mid-October, he says, although a few types, like **Paula Reds** and **Jersey Macs**, are ready to eat in late August.

Others—**Northern Spies** and **Blue Pear Maines**—are best in late October. In late September, **Cortland** is a perfect pie apple "because it holds its shape and doesn't turn brown after it's cut." Don't miss the **Maine heirloom** known as **Sheep's Nose** because of its shape.



Duck season runs from September to December, and while you can take up to six pintails or American coots a day in the season, with **moose** your limit is one. The best time to get your moose is when it's legal—between September and November. And the meat? The "Maine Moose Hunter's Guide," published by the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, recommends you take it to a butcher right away. Moose meat stew can be insanely rich—and unforgettable.



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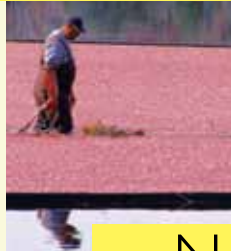
October



You can pick the perfect **pumpkin** from mid-September to early October. Peter Bolduc, of Harvest Hills Farms in Mechanic Falls, grows the traditional **Connecticut Field** variety

as well as an assortment of pie pumpkins. Need help? Try a **sugar pumpkin**.

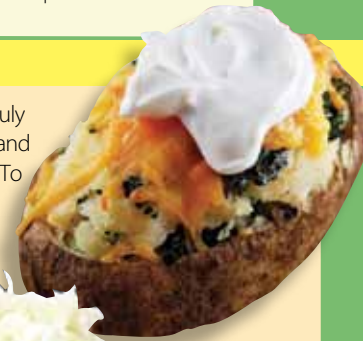
Deep in the heart of hurricane season, hundreds of miles off of Rockport in the Grand Banks, Browne Trading Company's owner Rod Mitchell and famous sea captain Linda Greenlaw are catching prized **swordfish**. To get the best, most recent of their catch, visit Browne Trading Company from mid-October to mid-November, where they deliver their freshest fish of the trip.



Many plants need to be harvested before the first frost hits, but for a select few a cold snap significantly improves their flavor. Among these are: **Brussel Sprouts**, winter and **Chinese cabbage**, **cranberries**, **horseradish**, **kale**, **parsnips**, **turnips**, and **rutabagas**. In Maine, the first frost can come as early as September, so veggie lovers should start keeping a close eye on temperatures then.

November

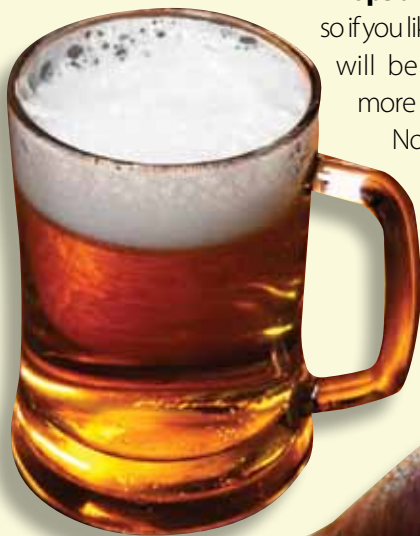
The **potato** harvest begins late in July (for new, usually red potatoes) and continues through late October. To enjoy most other varieties at their best, says Tim Hobbs, of the Maine Potato Board, "Try them in November."



Every autumn, a tiny ad appears in several Maine newspapers. "New kraut's ready," is all it says. But fans know this means that the latest crop of Morse's beloved **sauerkraut** is here.

Some people like the fresh kraut when it's first released, usually in October, when the flavor is "mild, faintly sweet and faintly sour," says Morse's co-owner David Swetnam. But he thinks the very best kraut is made from cabbage picked after a frost and allowed to cure long enough for the flavors "to develop so that it's really sour and nasty." Anytime from November through January is ideal, he says, and mid-November is probably best.

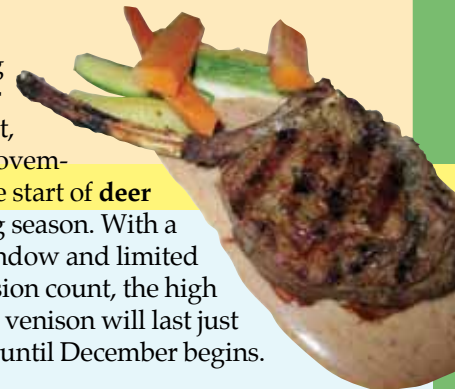
"**Hops** are picked in the fall, so if you like hoppy beer, it will be fresher and more aromatic if it's made in October or November," says Alan Pugsley, master brewer for Shipyard Brewery.



As the fields empty and leaves begin to fall, look for holiday meals from **wild pheasant**. With a hunting season that runs through December, you can look forward to roasted pheasant with whiskey sauce clear to the New Year.



Depending on your skill set, look to **November** for the start of **deer** hunting season. With a short window and limited possession count, the high time for venison will last just until December begins.



December

"You can have **sea urchin roe** anytime, but it's at its peak in December or early January," says diver Joe Leask, who sells to ISF Trading on Hobson's Wharf in Portland. "After that, the urchins begin to spawn and the flavor is less sweet."



Maine **shrimp** season begins December 1 and continues, technically, through April 15. But regulators have terminated the season in February for the last two years, deciding that fishermen were catching too many of the small, sweet crustaceans. Be safe and devour them early!



"This is a great time for almost all shellfish," says James King, of J.P.'s Shellfish, in Elliot, but it has nothing to do with the rumor about months ending in "R." It was previously thought it was safer to eat **oysters** in colder months due to lower bacteria in the water. However, author Rowan Jacobsen writes this rule was more so to protect over-harvesting than to protect ourselves. But oysters are at the peak now due to their recent diet. They spawn in summer and then feed incessantly to build up their glucose reserves for winter, "which gives them a sweet finish," he says. Enjoy them any time from September through December.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; FILE/STAFF PHOTO (4); TOM HOLMBERG/TOM'S FOODIE BLOG; DIANADIANASOURDISHES; GARY NOON/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; TOW DISTRIBUTING; FILE