



## Focus on Food

### IMPROV EATING: Crafting a Seasonal Dinner in the Moment

by Maria Noël Groves, Clinical Herbalist & Co-op Wellness Educator

**D**uring the peak of the season, traditional weekly meal planning goes out the window. You have to work with what's gloriously in front of you, not what sounded good on paper the night before! As an avid home cook, here's how I let seasonal abundance inspire rather than overwhelm my dinner creations:

**Look at Your Calendar.** One of our biggest challenges this time of year is that we're constantly on the go. If I'm not teaching, then my husband and I usually head out to kayak, hike, or visit with friends and family. I always look at my calendar before I go grocery shopping to take stock of the week's plans and how many night's I'll actually be home to cook. Be realistic: Figure out how many meals you'll be making that week, and keep in mind nights when you'll need something you can whip up fast or when you're serving guests or need something for a cookout.

**Take Stock of the Bounty:** Do a quick round to see what foods jump out at you. Maybe it's an amazing, deep purple eggplant, herbed goat cheese, or funky heirloom tomatoes. As the nights get cooler, crisp apples and hearty winter squash take center stage.

**Find Themes:** Once you have a few ingredients in mind, think about how they could come together in a dish and what ethnicity or types of foods they compliment. For example, eggplant, tomatoes, and goat cheese combine nicely in dishes inspired by the Mediterranean (pasta toss, pizza, panini, manicotti) as well as India and the Middle East (curries, baba ganoush). Ask around for ideas. I find my smartphone invaluable for recipes and inspiration on the fly; search via apps like EatingWell, Epicurious, and All Recipes. Find ways to turn ingredients or recipes into new meals or tasty leftovers for lunches or nights when you'll be too busy to cook. Keep in mind the time it takes to make a given recipe.

**Focus on Vegetables & Whole Foods:** This time of year, let the vegetables speak for themselves, and pile them on. One of our favorite summer meals is corn on the cob, steamed greens or a salad, and a veggie burger (no bun) topped with sliced tomato and cheese. It's ready in 10 minutes!

**Fill In the Gaps:** Think about what else you need to complete the dish. Perhaps some oregano for that eggplant? Are you out of olive oil?

**Get Home and Cook It!** Now, go home and ENJOY the food that you bought. When you cook, don't be skimpy with the vegetables. Unless you're planning to split it with a later dish, use it all! Half-

used veggies tend to rot in the fridge, and most recipes can accommodate the extra produce, even if it's a smidge more than the recipe calls for. Dinner leftovers are great in a wrap for lunch or scrambled into eggs for breakfast.

#### Some of My Favorite Adaptable Dinners:

- Tacos, burritos, and tostadas easily adapt to the ingredients at hand: Beans, winter squash, and mushrooms with a sprinkle of oregano and parmesan. Fresh tomatoes, avocado, cucumber, onion, and mozzarella. Lettuce, chickpeas, tomatoes, and feta.
- Sauté Mediterranean vegetables (eggplant, summer squash, mushrooms, peppers, kale/hearty greens, broccoli, and/or green beans) with fresh Italian herbs and toss with a whole grain or "noodles" made from raw zucchini along with protein like chickpeas, white beans, chicken, or salmon, and perhaps some cheese.
- Keep it simple. Simply slice and steam or roast vegetables like green beans, spinach, arugula, kale, zucchini, potatoes, squash, artichokes, broccoli, corn with a little butter or olive oil, salt, and pepper. Make salad with just greens, one other ingredient, and dressing. ■

Maria has an herbal practice in Allentown. For more recipes, visit [www.wintergreenbotanicals.com](http://www.wintergreenbotanicals.com).

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