

The



Idea

What if you could eat your fill every time, while losing weight and feeling fitter and happier?

BY JAMES McCORMACK

NEW YEAR'S DAY 2010. Like so many of you, I enter each year full of the usual hopes and expectations that this year will somehow be bigger and better. That it will burn incandescently bright. Instead, like every other year, it starts with the dark, dull thump of a hangover.

But despite the inauspicious start, it turns out this year is different. Because late into the year's first day, when I finally succumb to the urge to eat, my fruitless scouring of the cupboards, my staring into my refrigerator's cold and empty soul, is actually the start of a food journey that will see me arrive – a month later – fitter, happier and lighter. It will have been a month of the best food of my life, and as much of it as I've wanted. There will have been one caveat, though, and one only: it had to be fresh.



THE inspiration grew out of a lazy day spent reading American journalist Michael Pollan's bestseller, *In Defence of Food*. Now, I've always figured my diet isn't bad. Stellar? Hardly. But not horrendous. I don't eat much junk. I dutifully eat a piece of fruit during the day; vegetables usually grace my plate at dinner. But on this opening day of a new year, Pollan's book made me pause and actually calculate the proportion of fresh versus processed food I consume daily. And the sheer amount of the latter was startling.

When I considered cutting down my processed-food intake, though, I realised I'd become so habituated to the convenience of it – cereal, muesli bars, tinned food (baked beans, tuna, tomatoes), rice cakes, spaghetti sauce, simmer sauces, bread, curry pastes, etc, etc – that it seemed an almost impossible task. Then a crazy thought welled up: forget about *weaning* myself off processed food. To ram home how dependent on it I'd become, I decided,

for January at least, to go cold turkey. It was fresh or nothing.

I soon realised I wasn't the only one getting fresh. It seems I was jumping on a bandwagon much of Australia had already boarded. The success of our largest supermarket chain is not insubstantially a result of two decades of marketing themselves as "The Fresh Food People". Meanwhile, the number of farmers' markets has exploded and our television channels are crammed with food shows. Twenty years ago, what bloke could have named one renowned chef? Now, most of us could name a slew of "celebrity" chefs; and not one, I'd wager, doesn't emphasise freshness.

But most of us have failed to *commit* to freshness. Despite nutritionists banging on for years that we should be eating more fruit and vegetables, most Australians have been ignoring them. The 2007-08 National Health Survey showed that 93 per cent of Aussie blokes aren't eating the recommended daily amount of vegetables. Unsurprisingly, our waistlines have bulged; that same survey showed that 68 per cent of us are overweight or obese.

The problem isn't so much that fresh food is especially good for you (although it is); it's that processed food, especially in the quantities we're eating it, is bad.

Now, I could easily carry on and on about stuff you already know – such as the truckload of added salt in processed food being bad for you – or analyse the myriad additives in processed food that sound like something from a science experiment. (What, anyway, is the anticaking agent or the hydrolised vegetable protein in the packet of mac and cheese in my cupboard?) So, instead, I'll concentrate on what Dr Peter Williams, a researcher at the University of Wollongong in NSW and a board member of Food Standards Australia New Zealand, believes is the prime issue with processed food: its energy density.

In short, as opposed to fruit and vegetables, processed foods give you more kilojoules in fewer bites, partly because of the high water content of fruit and veg. Importantly, however, it's also because most processed foods contain added sugar and fat.

Take muesli bars, for instance. Most days, I tend to scoff down one or two of 'em – they seem healthy enough, especially the uppity, all-natural variety I buy – but when I mention them to Williams, he smiles yet another of his broad smiles and then uses them as an illustrative example. "You could just eat oats and fruit," he tells me, "but that's not convenient if you're sitting at your desk. And people want convenience, so you stick it together in a muesli bar. But the only thing to stick it together is fat or sugar."

But sugar does more than bind and raise the energy density of food; it makes you want to eat more. "There's a natural pleasure release from sweet foods," says Williams. "And the food companies know that. That's why they put it in. Partly it's cheap, but they also know it will appeal."

There's possibly another mechanism at work. Dr Robert Lustig, a professor of paediatric endocrinology at the University of California San Francisco, believes added fructose – in the form of high-fructose corn syrup in the US, and here, sucrose, which is actually 50 per cent fructose – is potentially at the heart of our obesity epidemic.

And it's not a simple result of increased kilojoules, because not all sugars are equal. Unlike glucose, which can be absorbed throughout your body, fructose can only be absorbed by your liver. Problem is, it's particularly bad for it: it increases uric acid, which, in turn, leads to higher blood pressure

and hypertension; it raises levels of (bad) LDL cholesterol; and it initiates an enzyme called "Junk one", which damages your insulin receptors, leading to interference with your leptin receptors. And here's the punchline: leptin is the hormone that tells you whether you're hungry or not. Turn off your leptin receptors and you don't know when to stop eating.

And don't think you have to be obese for the mechanism to function; it holds for all of us. There's one other thing, too – with this increased insulin, increased liver fat and increased liver inflammation, you end up with fatty liver disease. Fructose damages your liver in the same way as alcohol does, says Lustig. Just without the buzz.

On the flip side of the processed-versus-fresh-food ledger, there's the healthfulness of fruit and vegetables. Study after study has shown that as your intake of them increases, down goes your blood pressure, your cholesterol and your chances of having a stroke or developing coronary heart disease (the leading cause of death in Australia). Some studies – contentiously – go further, claiming their consumption reduces cancer risk as well.

It's long been assumed nutrients are responsible for this. Fruit and vegetables, variously, are full of them, including a raft of essential vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients and antioxidants – vitamins A, C, E, folic acid, niacin, riboflavin, thiamine, carotenoids, lycopene, selenium, lutein, flavonoids, polyphenols . . . honestly, the list could go on nearly forever.

But it may be other aspects of fruit and veg that cause the beneficial effects. Ever wondered why there seems to be a new study out every week claiming to have discovered which vegetable holds the key to good health? Essentially, admits the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, it's because although we're sure fruit and veg are healthful, no-one's exactly sure why.

Nutrients alone don't hold all the answers; for starters, vitamin supplements haven't shown the same benefits. Now, it could be that we haven't yet identified the appropriate vitamins and minerals, but it could also be a result of the combination of several, or even many, of these, or as yet unknown bioactive agents. It could be that fruit and veg consumption correlates with other elements of healthfulness, such as exercise, wealth or education. It may be that fruit and veg change gut flora, and that roughage and fibre are important. Maybe they



Do I need to buy organic?

This question elicits strong responses. It's no secret that industrial agriculture uses chemicals – fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides – with negative effects on the environment. Less known is that the search for higher yields has resulted in produce with fewer nutrients.

In *Still No Free Lunch*, Brian Halweil – a senior researcher specialising in food and agriculture at the Worldwatch Institute – notes UK and US government data showing double-digit percentage declines in iron, zinc, calcium, selenium and other essential nutrients over the past few decades.

But is malnourishment, especially for anyone eating plenty of fruit and veg, really an issue in Australia? If anything, we're getting too many nutrients. And getting large, commercial quantities of organic produce to the supermarket has its own negatives. For starters, it may have travelled long distances and not be as fresh as locally grown produce. And many local farms may be almost organic anyway, but simply lack the resources to undergo the massive task of certification. Most importantly, says Justin North, of Bécasse restaurant in Sydney, "Organic is not the be all and end all; it's flavour that matters."

slow carbohydrate absorption, reducing rapid blood-glucose highs after eating. It could merely be that filling your stomach with carrots doesn't leave so much room for meat pies.

So here's the thing: forget about trying to figure it out. Just accept that fresh food is healthy; know that if you eat a wide variety of it, eat lots of different colours, you *will* get enough nutrients, guaranteed. (For more on this, check out "Colour Your Palate" on page 142.)

But there's actually another reason, according to Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology researcher Gyorgy Scrinis, and it's to do with not merely the nutrients *per se*, but the whole ideology of "nutritionism". Nutritionism, Scrinis believes, "isn't bad because it gets it

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wrong – it often gets it right as well – but rather that this focus on nutrients decontextualises food to the point [where] many of us understand and relate to food primarily in terms of nutrients”.

I’m instantly drawn to any academic who suggests conducting an interview in a bar, so I find Scrinis easy company, full of smiles and wide-ranging discussion. But there is an intensity to him as well, especially when he fixes a hard look on me to hammer back, time and again, to this recurring theme: reductionist science is leading us astray from the greatest issue, the processing of food.

The issue is that by focusing on nutrients, it makes it possible for processed-food manufacturers to pluck out one or two of them and then claim health benefits for what are really otherwise unhealthy foods. Wander the aisles of any supermarket and look at what the packets shout: High in Iron! Vitamin A! Thiamine! Antioxidants! Omega 3! 80% RDI! That little secret – that they are 40 per cent sugar or loaded with salt or full of fat – never seems to make it to the front of the box.

“Having a long list of vitamins doesn’t make an unhealthy food healthy,” agrees Williams. “Part of the problem with the way that food is marketed now is that it is very nutrition focused – less fats, less salt, more calcium – and it’s making it sound like a scientific experiment.”

And the marketing has worked. Many people think of food in terms of ticking off boxes: milk for calcium, orange juice

for vitamin C, steak for iron or protein, fish for omega 3, tomatoes for lycopene, broccoli for antioxidants, capsicum for . . . blah-blah-blah. Talk about making eating a chore.

It’s a central element of Scrinis’ critique: not that nutrients are unimportant, but that focusing on them undermines other equally valid, commonsense ways of understanding food, such as flavour, culture, tradition, levels of processing, seasonality and locality. And freshness.

It’s perhaps not unsurprising, says Scrinis, that countries with what we might regard as having strong food cultures, such as France and Italy, have fallen least under nutritionism’s sway, and that the country with the weakest, the US, is the source of the nutritionist ideology. No prizes for picking where obesity is the greater problem.

When I said I was going cold turkey, I should’ve made it clear: *nearly* cold turkey. Because I’m a writer, giving up coffee is out of the question. As is alcohol, because, umm . . . I’ll use that writer excuse again. But I hear what you’re saying: you’re making up the rules as you go!

Well, it turns out, we all are. Australia has no legal definition of freshness. But I think we’d all agree, suggests Williams, that any food that’s largely unprocessed and unpreserved, as it would occur in nature, could be considered fresh, and that once there’s freezing, canning, drying or preservatives added, that it’s no longer fresh.

But there are caveats, and certain degrees of processing and preservation

don’t preclude us from considering a certain food fresh. Bread is an obvious example, even though you can’t get it from trees. Milk, likewise, even though it’s refrigerated.

Part of the issue, perhaps, is the fact that the word “fresh” has two allied but subtly differing meanings: the first being lack of processing; the second being the recent-ness of harvesting or preparation.

There’s no two ways about it, defining fresh involves a degree of intuition and subjectivity. And for the purposes of my experiment, I’ve allowed yoghurt, cheese, milk, sugar, honey, soy sauce, butter and olive oil. Bread, on the other hand, is out unless I bake it myself. In fact, that’s the rule I settle on. If I can make it myself, within reason, I will. Processing food from scratch, using only fresh ingredients, will give me the opportunity to reconnect with food. And that, perhaps more than any reason, is why I’m committing a month to freshness.

But there’s one other golden rule I’m following: quality. “Stop worrying about nutrients,” said Scrinis when we met over a beer. “Worry about quality.” Now, anyone who’s read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* will know that defining quality is devilishly hard – it sent the book’s protagonist mad – but I agree with Scrinis when he says, “I think people intuitively know what quality food is.”

My experiment starts with mixed results. That first day, New Year’s Day, I wander bleary-eyed down to my local supermarket without a specific meal in mind, figuring something will present

Asian-inspired Pumpkin Soup

2 tablespoons vegetable oil
2 tablespoons Thai curry paste
1 onion, diced
1 celery stalk, diced
1 tomato, chopped
1kg pumpkin, peeled and diced
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 litre (4 cups) good-quality vegetable or chicken stock
400ml can coconut milk (organic if available)
Coriander leaves for garnish

Heat a large heavy-based saucepan over a medium heat. Add oil and curry paste and cook for a couple of minutes, stirring often, until fragrant. Add the onion, celery, tomato and pumpkin; season with salt and pepper. Reduce heat and cook for 10 minutes, stirring often. Add stock to the saucepan, raise the heat and bring to the boil. Reduce to low heat, cover the saucepan and cook for 20 minutes, or until the pumpkin is tender. Purée soup and strain into a clean saucepan. Return the soup to the boil, whisk in the coconut milk and adjust seasoning. Serve with coriander leaves as a garnish. Serves 4-6.

From *In the Kitchen*, Allan Campion & Michele Curtis, \$69.95, Hardie Grant Books.



itself. It doesn’t. I quickly realise just how dependent I’ve become on processed food for a sauce, a dressing. I feel absolutely pathetic, because I do actually like my food, and my inability to think – off the top of my head – of a meal starting from scratch is embarrassing. I fall back on steak and three veg.

The next day, when I’m no longer staggering around in a hangover-induced fog, other meal options come to me, but still not so many. I find myself most days during that first week spending hours – yes, hours – poring through cookbooks, trying to figure out what seems suitably fresh, learning how to make sauces.

On the plus side, I’m rediscovering flavours I’d forgotten. One of my standard meals is Laab, a minced-meat salad from Laos. Along with lashings of mint, chilli and lemongrass, it requires lemon juice.

For years now I’d been getting my lemon juice from a bottle. Sad, huh? But did I mention how convenient juice from a bottle is? None of that pesky cutting or juicing. Or even shopping – buy just one bottle of the stuff and it lasts forever. But re-acquainting myself with the fresh-squeezed stuff, I was blown away by its sheer tang and intensity. And this is one of the many shortcuts I’d been taking. I suspect most of us are taking our own shortcuts, giving up flavour just for a little convenience.

Actually, the inconvenience of fresh food is both a blessing and a curse. It’s obvious what the curse is: it simply takes more time. This, arguably more than any other factor, is what’s pushed us to processed foods. On the other hand, the convenience of processed food is very possibly what’s been causing our girths to spread over the recent decades. ➔➔

MORE IN STORE

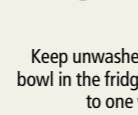
If fresh food makes you think of rotting lettuce at the bottom of your fridge, you have well-intentioned company. According to the Australia Institute, we throw away more than a billion dollars worth of fruit and vegetables yearly, and nearly as much again in meat and fish.

But according to North, there’s never an excuse to throw out anything. If it’s beginning to go off, you can puree it, juice it or make a relish, soup or stock. And making full use of a product allows you to justify spending more on quality.

North says: “Rather than buying a tasteless chicken that’s full of antibiotics, get a free-range chicken, but learn to stretch it further. You can use the carcass for stock, for wonderful soups; you can steam the breasts, confit the legs or flake the meat off the carcass for chicken-mayonnaise sandwiches.” When it comes to fruit and veg, here’s our guide to avoiding endless trips to the compost bin.



Artichokes
Store in the fridge, in a plastic bag, for up to five days.



Grapes
Keep unwashed, in a shallow bowl in the fridge, for up to one week.



Avocados
To ripen, place in a paper bag and store at room temperature for 2-4 days. Add an apple to the bag to speed things up. Ripe ones can go in the fridge for up to a week.



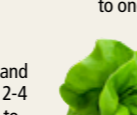
Eggplant
Keep in a cool location (not the fridge) for up to three days. Eggplants are sensitive to the cold and don’t keep well.



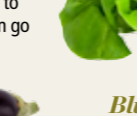
Button mushrooms
Spread them on a flat surface, cover with a damp paper towel and refrigerate for 3-5 days.



Broccoli
Refrigerate in a plastic bag for up to one week.



Lettuce
Refrigerate for 5-7 days in a plastic bag.



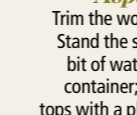
Blueberries
Transfer them unwashed to an airtight container and refrigerate for 5-7 days.



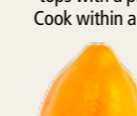
Pears
Ripen at room temperature in a loosely closed paper bag.



Green beans
Refrigerate unwashed in an unsealed bag for up to one week.



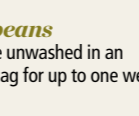
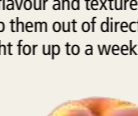
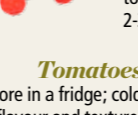
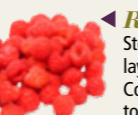
Asparagus
Trim the woody ends. Stand the spears in a bit of water in a tall container; cover the tops with a plastic bag. Cook within a few days.



Raspberries
Store unwashed in a single layer on a paper towel. Cover with a damp paper towel and refrigerate for 2-3 days.



Papayas
Once ripe, eat immediately or refrigerate for up to three days. Green papayas should be ripened at room temperature in a dark place until yellow blotches appear.



Watermelon
Keep whole in the fridge for up to a week to prevent flesh from drying out and turning fibrous.

Strawberries
Place unwashed berries in a single layer on a paper towel in a covered container.

Capsicums
Refrigerate in your fridge’s crisper for up to two weeks.

Peaches
Leave unripe ones out at room temperature. Ripe ones go in the fridge, but eat within 2-3 days.

Kiwis
Leave at room temperature to ripen. To quicken the process, place in a paper bag with an apple or a ripe banana. Once ripe, refrigerate in a plastic bag for up to a week.



Pineapple
If it’s unripe, keep it at room temperature for 3-4 days until it softens and gives off a pineapple aroma. Refrigerate for up to five days.

If you up the quality, you're often likely to be satisfied with less

Straight from the farm: Justin North carves his own cuts from a carcass. Chefs working with fresh produce at Bécasse; once you've eaten heirloom tomatoes, you won't go back to hard, flavourless mass-produced varieties.

In *Why Have Americans Become More Obese*, a group of Harvard economists claimed the answer was to be found in the reduced time cost of obtaining and preparing food, particularly snacks. My own experience is bearing this out. In the past, when I felt peckish, I would snack. Muesli bars, toast, those little tins of tuna, biscuits. Whatever was handy and could be eaten quickly. Now if I snack, it's fruit. But there's only so much fruit you can eat. And if it comes to preparing a meal from scratch, it's often simply too much of a hassle and I put it off until I'm well and truly hungry.

Whether it's the time cost, the reduced energy density, the lowered sugars, better-functioning leptin receptors, something is changing: my weight. It's dropping. Over the previous six months, and especially over the burst of good living that runs through the silly season from Melbourne Cup to New Year, I've

put on some kilos. Four, to be precise. The result has been a pair of small but persistent love handles. I'd attributed them to being the result of alcohol. And now they're disappearing. At first, I'm surprised: I haven't given up alcohol; I've been using goodly quantities of butter.

In fact, I've made meals where butter has been a central ingredient, such as one of the best meals of the month, a sirloin – admittedly the most expensive piece of steak I've ever bought at \$40+ a kilo, but what the hey, Scrinis' exhortation for quality has won me over – surpassed only by its topping, a fresh thyme and roasted-tomato butter. (Ruefully, I have to admit it had never occurred to me previously that thyme actually came fresh – it was something, I believed, that came dry from a jar.) Meanwhile, everything dairy has been full-fat, from my milk to the yoghurt I've been having with bananas, passionfruit, strawberries and honey to replace my usual breakfast of muesli or toast.

What's more, I've been eating as much as I want. And I've always been a big eater. It is true, though, that my meal sizes have shrunk. I just haven't felt like eating my usually sizeable servings. It may be the leptin receptors

Lustig talks about, but it may also be a factor Australian nutritionist Dr Rosemary Stanton suggests: that if you up the quality, you're often likely to be satisfied with less.

Supermarkets perform miracles daily. They transport food from across the country and, indeed, the world, so that we can buy whatever we choose. The logistics involved are immense, especially when it comes to fresh food, which can waste in a week or less. We can get tomatoes year-round, despite the fact they're a summer fruit. But am I getting quality when I buy a tomato grown for its looks and long storage life, rather than its flavour? Is a strawberry picked in California that ends up in my supermarket in inner Sydney really fresh? Am I eating healthily when that piece of broccoli picked 10 days ago has now lost 45 per cent of its vitamin C?

Sooner or later, if you're hunting fresh food, chances are you'll end up at the markets. Having never visited any before, I decide to dive in headfirst by travelling to the country's largest: Melbourne's Queen Victoria Markets. A buzzing crowd swirls through the mountains of technicolour produce and the labyrinthine maze of meat and seafood merchants – it's the type of place

a guide would be handy. Luckily for me I have one: Allan Champion, co-author of *The Foodies' Guide to Melbourne*.

As Champion leads me around, it doesn't take me long to wonder whether, as a born and bred Sydneysider, I'd trade my harbour for these markets. They are so fantastically sensory; a frontal assault of sound, touch, smell, taste and sight. And they're participatory. Some customers pepper merchants with questions. Others, wearing serious expressions, haggle. Me, I'm smiling, because I find it all rather exciting. Perhaps it's just that I have a low threshold for excitement. But Champion, who's been coming here twice weekly for decades, seems thrilled to be here as well.

When I first meet Champion, I am struck by his neat-as-a-pin-ness for an outing to the markets; it seems there is not a ruffle in his shirt or hair out of place. He makes even jeans seem refined. But while his attire is restrained, his excitement is not. He wears a Cheshire-cat grin around the markets, beaming as he points out the scallops or the peaches. As he smells strawberries, his eyes close in bliss. "It's the noise and the collective purpose," he says. "Everyone's chat

chat chat, thinking about food, thinking of dinner."

Speaking of which, Champion's got his already. Tomatoes, zucchinis, eggplants, butter beans, radish, fresh basil; all are right at their peak season. "Seasonality is my absolute guiding rule," he tells me. "Everything starts from there. Ingredients that are naturally grown at that time of year are very good value for money, they're nutritionally very good and they're full of flavour. As a cook, full of flavour means I don't have to do very much work. If I buy tomatoes in the middle of winter to make tomato soup, I have to add a lot of salt and other seasonings to make it taste like tomato soup. But in summer, it's a breeze."

So what are the advantages of markets over supermarkets? Well, even to my untrained eye, I can see one obvious difference: competition. It's fierce. With stalls cheek-by-jowl, if your quality's low or price is too high, shoppers simply move on to the next stall. But according to Champion, freshness is number one. But then he also cites quality. And service. And recipe tips. And relationships. "It's only by shopping somewhere regularly that



Allan Champion prowls the stalls at Melbourne's Queen Victoria Markets.

you have that chat, you catch up and you come to know some people really well, and you hope they're going to give you the good stuff. Because you're going to come back, and they're relying on you to have a great experience to come back again and again."



Justin North's Daube of Beef Shin with Confit Carrots

4 x 200g pieces trimmed beef shin
500ml red wine
1 onion, roughly chopped
1 bulb garlic, roughly chopped
1.5 litres liquid beef stock

3 medium Desiree potatoes
150ml mix of butter, milk and cream
4 carrots
100g duck fat*

Combine the beef with the wine, onion and garlic and marinate overnight. Pre-heat your oven to 110°C. Drain off the marinade and put to one side before browning the beef and vegetables in a little cooking oil. Add the marinade and reduce, adding the stock until the beef is submerged. Bring to a simmer and cover with a lid before putting it in the oven to braise gently for

3-4 hours, until very soft. Meanwhile, cut the potatoes into chunks, place in a saucepan and cover with cold water, season with salt and bring to a simmer. Cook gently for 25 minutes until the potatoes are tender; drain in a colander. Heat the milk mix and whisk.

Push the potatoes through a fine sieve, place back on the heat and mix in the milk emulsion, season with salt

and pepper; keep hot. For the confit carrots, peel and dice the carrots, then cook them in a saucepan over a medium heat with the duck fat for 10 minutes until tender.

To serve, place a large spoon of potato purée in the centre of your warm serving bowls, add the beef, scatter over the carrots and spoon over the braising juices. Serves 4.

From *French Lessons*, Justin North, \$45, Hardie Grant Books.
* The secret ingredient that makes this dish sing. Easily available in delis and supermarkets.

James' Tomato Salad

2 or 3 heirloom tomato varieties (Black Krimms, Ox Hearts, Green Zebras, Golden Jubilees), roughly cut
Murray River pink salt flakes*
English spinach
Cos lettuce
Rocket
Feta, cut into cubes
Balsamic vinegar
A drizzle of extra-virgin cold-pressed olive oil

Sprinkle the salt flakes on the fresh-cut tomatoes, mix in the greens, throw in the feta and drizzle with vinegar and olive oil to taste.

* Buy from the Australian Dried Fruits Association (\$5.40/150g; adfa.asn.au)



in little plastic trays from supermarkets. But here I am, enveloped by a cold meaty smell that I haven't experienced in years, watching North and two of his chefs work in quick moves and unexpected silence.

During a break, North pulls me aside to show me several carcasses that he's currently dry ageing. In the low light, they are dark, almost chocolate brown. Unlike chicken and pork, beef and lamb is best aged, not fresh; the taste intensifies and the tenderness increases. But the longer they're aged, the lighter, and pricier, the meat becomes. Wet ageing, a cheaper process, can increase tenderness but not flavour.

But there are other factors, says North: animal welfare on the farm affects the flavour and tenderness. Most important, though, is the end of the line. "If [the beasts] get stressed, their pH levels go up, which can make it go dark, and a bit bitter and tough."

As a chef, North hasn't always been searching for quality, flavour and freshness. When at age 15 he quit school in Blenheim, New Zealand, he chose a cooking apprentices' course because his surging testosterone had him on a quest for something else: lots of girls.

But the course catapulted him on a journey around the world; to England – where he trained under Raymond Blanc at his famed two-Michelin star restaurant Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons – and to the central NSW town of Dunedoo, where the beast he's now dismantling blissfully grazed until recently.

North insists on meeting with producers. But there's more to this than just a quest for quality produce; it's a search for meaning. "Regional distinctiveness is at the heart and soul of our food," says North, "because it gives it . . . a lot of meaning, rather than just buying generic produce. [And] meaning is everything really. It's all about that shared table: family, friends, celebration."

When I initially thought about eating fresh, I thought of healthiness. But I'm realising that, actually, there are stronger arguments.

For starters, if it's health alone we're after, then we may as well eat frozen produce, since, according to Williams, it's often as healthful as the fresh stuff. There's also the fact that health, for me, has never been an entirely compelling argument. Coronary heart

On Your Doorstep

Can't make it to the markets? Get them to come to you. There are several companies in our major cities that will deliver boxes of fresh produce to your door. Not only will you get great produce, but they often contain a few items that you've never cooked with. Check out: flemingtondirect.com.au, boxfresh.com.au, organicfood.com.au, aussiefarmers.com.au, thegreenline.com.au, fruitveg4u.com.au



disease, stroke, liver issues – all seem to be so far into the future. But flavour and quality, that's here and now, something that can never be matched by frozen or tinned produce. Freshness means a tastier meal tonight.

There are only three things we need to survive: air, water, food. Of these, only food gives us joy and binds us together. But if you think of food as fuel, think of it in terms of nutrients – even worse, as only being pre-prepared and from a package – then it's stripped of meaning.

Food is surely most meaningful (and freshest) if we grow it ourselves. If we lovingly tend a veggie patch or a pot of herbs, or keep a few chooks clucking away in our backyards. Or we could visit the producers where the food we eat is raised or grown. But

not all of us have the time to do this; it's much easier to let them come to us. Enter the farmers' market.

"It's food with a face," says Jane Adams, chairperson of the Australian Farmers' Market Association. "There's a context to the food that you're eating. Whether it's seafood, oysters or salt-bush-reared lamb, these

people can tell you how they've done it and why they've done it.

"At a supermarket, who do you talk to? At a farmers' market, you talk to the farmer . . . to the people standing next to you. And that's what human beings crave; we've lost connection with the soil, and we've lost connection with each other. Farmers' markets satisfy both needs."

The number of farmers' markets in Australia has exploded in recent years. While the first market only opened in 1999, there are now more than 130.

Adams has been a catalyst for many, running workshops all over the country on how to set them up. She believes their popularity lies not only in their ability to re-form connections, but in their ability to deliver true freshness. "In a farmers' market, you're buying seasonally, you're buying food that has been picked in the last 24 hours, so you're buying food at its peak ripeness," she says. Conversely, she adds, food that's being sold in supermarkets has been bred to last longer, which often means that it's hard and flavourless.

The other thing about farmers' markets is that you can buy heritage or heirloom varieties of produce that often have more flavour. North introduced me to a range of vegies I'd never heard of – golden beetroots, purple carrots, Black Krim tomatoes – so I went to Sydney's Eveleigh Farmers' Market determined to buy some for myself. Though I wanted farm-fresh eggs and bagfuls of vegies, more than anything else, it was heirloom tomatoes that I wanted.

Tomatoes seem a bellwether for what's wrong with much of our supermarket produce. North sums it up: "They used to look like shit. Now they've got them looking good, but tasting like . . ." No need to finish the sentence.

At Eveleigh, I speak with Alf Sorbello, a grower of heirloom tomatoes in the outer-Sydney suburb of Dural. "I read about a tomato variety," he tells me, "and they were raving about how firm

it was. Why would you want to buy a tomato that's hard? Some you buy in a supermarket, you throw 'em against a wall and they'll bounce. Ours splatter."

I come away with a bagful – Black Krimms, Green Zebras, Golden Jubilees, Grosse Lisses, Ox Hearts – that will produce the most flavourful salad I've ever made (see recipe, left). I also come away smiling. The happiness at the markets seems infectious. I tend to be a pretty happy guy in general, but this month I've noticed that I'm particularly happy. It may be a physiological response to healthier eating; it may be psychological, in that I'm thinking constantly about food, the only of the three absolute necessities of life that gives us joy. It may be that I'm enjoying eating the best, most flavourful, most meaningful food I've ever eaten. It may be that I'm making a self-affirming statement: that I'm spending all this time on food because I'm worth it.

That's not all. I've lost four kilos. The love handles I'd spent six months developing are gone. But I've done it eating as much great food as I want.

And I'm feeling strong. Near the month's end, I run a hilly five-kay course I've been running fortnightly for several years, and put in my second quickest time ever. The only time I did better – and it was by a mere six seconds – was immediately after returning from a month hiking and climbing at altitude.

And I've even convinced the toughest critic of all: my wife. As with many of my "experiments", Alexis was initially sceptical. A word involving bovines and excrement was tossed about. But not only have I managed to persuade her to reconsider her previous seafood aversion – it was fresh blue-eye cod with coriander, tomato and thyme that did the trick – when we leave Eveleigh markets, she turns to me and says, "You know we're never going to be able to go back to the way we used to eat." She may not have been right at the start of the month, but she's right now. There's no going back. 

WHO BLEW UP OUR FOOD?

The food we consume today is different from the food we ate 20 or 30 years ago. Here's how

We've sabotaged our food with time bombs.

Before World War II, it was difficult for food manufacturers to create baked goods that would last on store shelves. Most baked goods require oils, and oil leaks at room temperature. So since WWII, manufacturers have been baking with – and restaurateurs have been frying with – trans fat. It's cheap and effective: it makes potato chips crispier and biscuits tastier. The downside: trans fat increases your bad cholesterol, lowers your good cholesterol and increases heart-disease risk.

We don't even know what's in our food.

Increasingly, manufacturers are adding new types of preservatives, fats and sugars to your food. Just looking at the labels on the shelves might give you flashbacks to high-school chemistry. Food Standards Australia New Zealand has encoded more than 300 additives, and any one of them could end up on your plate. But often, they go unexplained or, in the case of restaurant food, unmentioned. (What is carrageenan*, anyway?) Unless you're eating it right off the tree, it's difficult to know what exactly is in that fruity dish.

Our fruits and vegetables aren't as healthy as they once were.

Researchers in a study in the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition* tested 43 different garden crops for nutritional content and discovered that six out of 13 nutrients showed major declines between 1950 and 1999: protein, calcium, phosphorus, iron, riboflavin and ascorbic acid (vitamin C). The declines are probably due to newer crop varieties that grow faster and can be picked earlier. As a result, the plants aren't able to take in or make nutrients at the same rate.

Even the animals we eat are different today.

The average piece of chicken has 165 per cent more fat than it did in 1970, while its protein content has dropped by a third, say scientists at London Metropolitan University. As we no longer eat chickens that roam the farm – they're mostly kept in cages and fed antibiotic-laced soy and corn and other unnatural foods – today's chicken has more fat kilojoules than protein kilojoules. (Though skinless breast is still a good choice, for dinner.) – Matt Goulding

* Extract of red seaweed used in processed foods for stabilisation and thickening.

PLAY THE MARKET

Jane Adams' tips for getting the most from farmers' markets

- 1 Get up early.
- 2 Take plenty of bags or a trolley; you need to be able to cart all your purchases away.
- 3 Pre-planning goes a long way. Invariably, your eyes will be bigger than your stomach and you'll end up with too much food if you're not careful. Have an idea of how many nights you're shopping for, or if it's a dinner party, exactly what you're going to cook.
- 4 Take suitable containers to safely store cheese, meat and milk in.
- 5 Beware of bananas: along with many tropical fruits, they're a flag of authenticity. If you're in southern Australia and there are bananas, you can be pretty sure they weren't grown locally.
- 6 Take your children; it's educational and good fun.
- 7 Take cash. Some markets have ATMs, but not all.

8 Talk to the farmer or stallholder and ask lots of questions.

For more info about farmers' markets and locations around the country, go to farmersmarkets.org.au.

