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Fresh from the
Farm to the **Table**

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Cook with the Seasons for Great Family Meals

Recently, as I was walking through the aisles of my neighborhood grocery store, it occurred to me how produce is now so readily available that we have forgotten—or possibly never learned—that vegetables and fruits are seasonal and each one has its time and place within the cooking year. So while we may pay dearly for asparagus in December or cherries in February, they're always there for the taking.

But with increasing awareness of organic, fresh, and sustainable food and the growing popularity of farmers' markets, we're beginning to question this constant availability, choosing instead to celebrate seasonal food and build personal relationships with the farmers who raise it.

Professional chefs most often lead our food consciousness by introducing our palates to new taste combinations or reminding us of ingredients we'd like to try in our own kitchens. So I decided to talk with four great cooks whose food I love and get their

realize the benefits through much more flavorful meals. Seasonal fruits and vegetables taste the best. Animals fed a sound diet produce meat with better texture and flavor."

In her new book, *Williams-Sonoma Family Meals: Creating Traditions in the Kitchen* (Oxmoor House, 2008), Sinskey shows us how to cook with the freshest ingredients and make food memories that will last a lifetime. "Find out what grows in your area," she says. "Don't buy from other hemispheres—instead, stick to your own. While it may be easier to do this in



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ideas on how we can bring the seasons back to our family table.

Maria Helm Sinskey is an award-winning chef who lives in Napa Valley and owns Robert Sinskey Vineyards with her husband. Culinary director for the winery and mother of two young daughters, she is constantly cooking and is passionate about using fresh, local, organic fruits, vegetables, and meats when they're at their peak.

"Looking at food seasonally goes against the fiber of American diets," she says. "We have become a culture that wants everything immediately and all year round. Moving back to seasonal will be difficult for many people, but once they get the hang of it they'll

summer and fall, there's a lot of variety in the winter and spring if you look carefully at what you are buying in the market."

Chris Schwarz cooked in the best kitchens across the globe and in Seattle prior to becoming executive chef at Alderbrook Resort & Spa, on Northwest Washington state's Hood Canal. He now has direct access to Dungeness crab, seasonal salmon runs, and shellfish like oysters and mussels pulled from the waters outside his door.

"My philosophy is to use excellent local ingredients and let them speak for themselves," he says. "Most items and products that we cook with have natural seasons in which they're grown

and harvested—it's exciting and satisfying to utilize what nature has provided at a specific time. So start frequenting farmers' markets and roadside stands and soon you'll become aware of produce that's available only at certain times. You may want to look into local farms that operate a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, where fruits and vegetables are delivered in personal boxes for home use at pick-up sites on a weekly basis. You'll be making an 'investment' in supporting the farm and gain a great connection to your local farming community at the same time."

Jody Adams is a culinary rock star in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who's been cooking since the 1980s, when she began her career with revered Boston chef Lydia Shire. Today, Chef Adams' loyal following craves her inventive interpretation of regional Italian cuisine at her four-star restaurant, Rialto.

Her favorite season? "Usually, it's whatever's coming up," she laughs, adding, "but if I had to pick one, it would be spring. It's

Adams teaches cooking classes frequently at Rialto and feels the most important thing a novice can learn from her is how to look at an ingredient and imagine all the possibilities for its preparation. "Instead of looking at an acorn squash and thinking, 'All I know how to do is half it, butter it, and bake it,' think about soups, purees, or stirring it into a risotto. Roast it, layer it in a gratin, pair it with curry, fresh herbs, cheese;...there are so many different directions," she says.

Keith Luce, former White House chef during the Clinton administration, leads the culinary team at the world-renowned Herbfarm Restaurant in Woodinville, Washington. Several nights a week, he invents magnificent nine-course feasts from the "flavor library" in his head and an ever-changing access to wild foraged and organically farmed ingredients. "I'm not a big fan of recipes," admits Luce. "We all need a repertoire of basic cooking techniques, but I think recipes should be a guideline. It's far more important to pay close attention to ingredients



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so interesting because we're coming out of winter—cold, bare, and white, and I'm craving warmth, green, and life. I love chervil and sorrel in the spring and the first vegetables—pea tips, artichokes—it's fun to work with those very fresh flavors.

"I really believe that we must get back to a community-based world," notes Chef Adams. "The first step in enjoying a great meal is to get to know the farmer, rancher, fisherman who helps you bring food to the table. They're the most passionate, interesting, wonderful people on earth. And if you don't know what to do with their products, just ask them—they'll have great ideas and be happy to share them."

and taste as you cook. So, don't be afraid to experiment with them. After a while, the whole thing becomes less of a mystery and more an extension of life."

Adds Chef Schwarz, "You'll start to recognize tastes and flavors, and soon you'll put combinations together based on your past experience with these particular flavors."

Though each chef has a unique background and culinary style, they all agree on these cooking basics: Have fun, relax, and enjoy the moment. The simplest meal, prepared with love, is better than anything you can buy. Now that's a food memory worth keeping. ■