



Stop and smell the garlic

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 Some people think garlic is just garlic, that all garlic is the same. They're wrong, say the Quebec farmers who grow garlic: Fresh garlic – the kind that Quebecers are only now starting to learn about in any number – is juicy and bursting with flavour.

"It's like night and day when compared with what's in the stores," says Quebec farmer Daniel Brisebois, a member of the Tourne-Sol Co-operative Farm, a small, certified organic vegetable farm 50 kilometres west of Montreal in Les Cèdres.

"When you cut into the garlic you get from a local producer, the juiciness is astounding; it spits."

Right now is the time to buy garlic from local producers, and there's no better place to do it than at the second annual garlic festival being held today at the Ste. Anne de Bellevue farmers' market.

Locally grown garlic "has a more sweet and complex taste," said Alison Hackney of La Ferme du Fort Senneville, on the western tip of the island of Montreal in Senneville.

Although supermarket garlic all seems to look the same and nearly always is the same – a type known as Silverskin garlic – there are, in fact, different types of garlic – and their range of flavour is nothing short of "astounding," says Brisebois, 30.

"All the different varieties have different heat levels," he explained. "Some are mild and sweet"; others are pungent and "kind of spicy."

Of the Porcelain, one of three main types of garlic grown at Tourne-Sol, he says: "When you bite into it, it bites back."

Who knew?

Sadly, most of us don't get near the good stuff.

Nearly all the garlic in our supermarkets is imported, most of it from China, which produces the majority of the world's garlic. It may well have been harvested months before landing in your grocery cart. Its taste is a shadow of ours.

The good news is that local producers are growing more than they ever have.

Most local garlic was harvested in the last days of July, then dried, or "cured," for a few weeks – and is coming to market now. It can be found mainly in farmers' markets in the Montreal area and at outdoor markets.

"There is definitely a big interest in garlic," said Brisebois, who has been growing it for eight years.

One reason is that the quality of supermarket garlic has been declining, he said. "And there has been a parallel increase in local growing. People who like garlic want nice garlic We have clients who buy one of our bulbs – and start to swear by our garlic."

The Tourne-Sol farmers sell their vegetables to the public on Saturdays at Finnegan's in Hudson through the end of October and at the Ste. Anne de Bellevue farmers' market.

At Fermes des Moissons in St. Urbain, one of Quebec's largest garlic producers, Daniel Brais says they have been growing steadily more garlic each year for the past decade.

When his father started to grow garlic in the early 1970s, he planted 100 pounds. Now they plant 20 times that each year – and sell it at stands at Montreal's Jean Talon and Atwater markets.

Such is the enthusiasm of Quebecers for garlic that, when Brisebois organized the first Quebec garlic festival at the farmers' market in Ste. Anne de Bellevue last August, at least 500 people turned up, from as far away as the Eastern Townships and the city's east end – maybe double the number who'd normally turn up at the weekly market: So many, in fact, that the vendors ran

out of garlic.

"We were knocked out by the turnout," he said. "We underestimated how popular it would be. ... Many people bought five to 10 bulbs. They were buying it to eat and to plant."

The four garlic producers at this year's festival have hundreds and hundreds of garlic bulbs to sell "to ensure no garlic lovers leave empty-handed."

This celebration of garlic is part of a trend: Consumers increasingly interested in buying and eating locally grown food. Garlic festivals are held all over the world – as far afield as Korea, Finland and Italy as well as here in North America. An inaugural garlic festival was held in Stratford last year, and the Hudson Valley Garlic Festival attracts nearly 50,000 visitors a year. Attendance at the 30th Gilroy Garlic Festival in California was more than 107,500 over three days last month.

"I have been to a lot of festivals and really enjoyed them," said Brisebois. "People who like garlic are a great bunch."

But how to explain the craving? What is it about garlic?

A few theories: Hackney of La Ferme Fort du Senneville thinks part of it is the sheer beauty of the garlic bulb. "The shape is just so nice and round and full," she said. "It seems to me a quintessential symbol of the harvest and of abundance."

The locally grown bulbs are lovely to look at – almost sculpted. Some are smooth and white; others, like the artichoke, have some colour. "I'd even say garlic cloves have a kind of mystique about them," said Hackney, who last year planted 300 pounds of garlic and harvested 1,500. "They're like no other farm produce. Practically every other plant we grow from seed," she said. With garlic, it's the clove that's planted and yields a bulb. "So you are always planting a piece of the same plant."

Brisebois explained that about one quarter of the crop is kept back for replanting. "We select the ones we like best – the ones that are undamaged and symmetric, with not too many cloves, to replant."

At Tourne-Sol, where 12,000 to 14,000 bulbs were harvested last month, garlic is one of the main crops – "and one of our favourites," he said. "It tastes great, it's fun to harvest, fun to clean and great to work with: When you pull it out of the ground and see a big bulb, it kind of knocks your socks off."

Quebec garlic is sometimes sold at farmers' markets – and at today's garlic festival – in braids, the stems still attached to the bulbs. Some say garlic stores better that way. "A braid is a handy way to store garlic," Hackney said. "You can hang it in the kitchen and it looks nice."

Compared to refrigeration and canning, hanging is an old, old way of preserving, she said. "The idea of having the produce last 10 months or until next summer is satisfying," she said.

(It's a common misconception that garlic is best stored in the fridge: It's too humid in there. Garlic is best stored at room temperature, away from direct light and drastic temperature fluctuations, so don't store it near the stove.)

"And garlic is delicious. It adds so much to practically everything you cook." Hackney likes to put garlic into whatever savoury foods she cooks. When she makes a salad, she smashes a clove and rubs the inside of the bowl with it first. When she sautés vegetables, she smashes a clove and puts it in the oil. "It's such a wonderful fragrance."

Garlic is part of the allium family – a cousin to onion, green onion and leek. But whereas "onion is more a foundation in a dish and the difference in taste is not that remarkable with onions, I think garlic stands out because it can highlight a dish," said Brisebois.

It's also healthful – even medicinal. Garlic contains chemicals that fight everything from viruses and bacteria to cancer and bad cholesterol, and it is said to boost the immune system. "I have heard lots of people tell me they use it as a cold remedy. ... When I feel myself getting a cold or a sore throat, I smash up a clove and mix it into a jar of honey," Hackney said.

And then there's this Earth we all live on together to think of. "People are increasingly interested in eating local and also, I think, increasingly distressed about the assault on our world by the long-distance transport of food," said Hackney. "People are more and more aware of these things, and they want to take care of the place they live – the planet."

That said, Quebec produces only about five per cent of the garlic it consumes – and little locally grown garlic actually makes its way to stores. "There are a couple of small health-food stores we deal with, but we are not reliably in stores," said Brisebois. Besides, the crop is sold out by November. "And growing more would make it difficult to ensure quality; we have chosen a scale that we are happy with."

You may have noticed that your Chinese garlic, inexpensive as it is, often lasts no longer than a couple of weeks after you get it home. You'll pay more for Quebec garlic – \$1.50 to \$2.50 per bulb, generally, but it keeps for months.

"It's two to three times more expensive, but I would say it is about 100 times better," said Brisebois. "Because it has so much flavour, you are not using as much. And it stores longer, so there is no waste."

"What you get from local Quebec farmers, even with mediocre storage, lasts to December. Store it well and it lasts until March. Those are big, concrete differences."

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The Second Annual Garlic Festival is on today (Saturday) from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Ste. Anne de Bellevue farmers' market on the boardwalk by the bridge, near city hall at 109 Ste. Anne St. Four garlic producers will be on hand with varieties of garlic bulbs for sale along with braids. Other market merchants will have garlic bread, garlic cheese, garlic sausage and garlic chocolate-chip cookies for sale. Three informal, bilingual and free workshops take place in the morning: 9:30 – Know your garlic varieties, with Daniel Brisebois; 10:30 – A garlic braiding demonstration with Alison Hackney in which people will be able to make their own braids and buy them; 11:30 – garlic growing Q&A with Brisebois.

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