

Is seasonal eating overrated?

By Katherine Wheelock, Food & Wine

For a couple of weeks last winter, I went on a kale-eating spree. I didn't do this on purpose, exactly. I was making my way through a list of newish New York restaurants I wanted to try, or to revisit because fall had surrendered to winter and I knew their menus would have changed. Most of these places had Dickensian names, names broken by ampersands, or names that sounded like old Vermont family farms. Many had menus freshly jotted on chalkboards, the provenance of the main ingredient in each dish noted. And every last one of them was serving a kale salad. Not long into my dining tour, right around the time I confronted a version with apple and dry Jack at a restaurant a block away from where I'd just had a version with apple and cheddar, I began to regard kale salad the way, as a kid, I viewed my mom's second flounder dinner in the same week: with resentment.

My spree came to an end at a perfectly lovely, smart young Italian restaurant in Brooklyn. It's not that I was looking forward to carciofi—I knew not to expect out-of-season artichokes at a place known for its market-driven menu. But I didn't expect to be offered a kale salad. I felt betrayed, sitting there on my stool clutching a season-befitting quince cocktail. I felt like a road warrior so disoriented by sameness, I didn't know what hotel I was in anymore, never mind what city.

What followed my kale bender, as often does benders, was a mild depression. What's wrong with me? I thought. Of all the things to complain about, I was criticizing chefs for systematically removing stringy asparagus from my winter plate and replacing it with the sweetest, tastiest, most environmentally beneficent produce around. The proliferation of seasonally driven menus, albeit a trend mostly still

confined to a certain kind of restaurant in a certain kind of town, promised better dining experiences and a smaller culinary carbon footprint for America—a win-win. Come spring, I could count on more chefs than ever to rain morels, fiddleheads and ramps down on me. And I was dreading it.

“I came back from Rome in the spring of 2004 to a rampapalooza,” recalls journalist Frank Bruni, the former restaurant critic for the New York Times, reflecting on the early days of seasonal fever. “I remember thinking it was great that chefs were exalting the seasons, but also: Do I need to eat this many ramps?”

I remember those days, too. I was practically braiding ramps into headbands, reveling in Mario Batali’s embrace of spring produce, in Dan Barber’s more priestly devotion to seasonal ingredients, and in the way powerful tastemakers like these chefs were beginning to alter menus all over New York City. Ramp season—and rhubarb, asparagus and strawberry season—was like Christmas. But then Christmas started coming every day. And even more distressingly, seasonally driven menus began to feel less like a genuine celebration of good ingredients and more like some kind of manifesto. “Ramps speak to a lot of different restaurant vanities right now,” Bruni says. “They have become more of an ideological, moral statement than a gustatory one.”

To be fair to ramps, they didn’t start this trend. The 21st-century seasonal-food movement began four decades ago, when Alice Waters founded Chez Panisse in Berkeley. She established the hallmarks of seasonal cooking: locally grown ingredients, simply prepared. These days, the “simply prepared” part is what many critics of slavishly seasonal menus lament. It’s not the zeal for seasonal produce that’s the problem, they say; it’s the lack of imagination that chefs bring to the task of cooking it.

Read the whole story

