

## 8. FOOD

By Carol Righy

**M**any Nunavut restaurants offer delicious, well prepared “country food,” what northerners call foods traditionally eaten by Inuit. Arctic char, a fish similar to salmon, is one of the most popular. Scallops gathered from Cumberland Sound by Inuit fishermen are sometimes available at restaurants and retail outlets in Iqaluit and other northern communities. Greenland shrimp is also a local favourite. Turbot from Pangnirtung may also be available in season, in the Baffin. Caribou is a northern staple. It is very nutritious and low in fat, so it’s a good choice for the diet-conscious, and widely available. Muskox, most easily available in the Kitikmeot, is well worth trying, very much like well-marbled beef.

For the more adventurous palate, community feasts offer traditional fare such as raw and boiled caribou and seal, and raw frozen char. Everyone is welcome at community feasts, but be prepared to experience culture shock: you will see whole seals laid out on the floor, being butchered and consumed raw in the manner Inuit have done for centuries. You may encounter *maktaaq*, the outer layer of skin and blubber from whales (beluga and narwhal), served raw. An Inuit delicacy, this food is very warming due to its high caloric content. The usual method of eating *maktaaq* is to cut it in small bits and swallow whole. Local shellfish such as mussels and clams are also popular fare in some communities. But these are almost never available on a commercial basis — you will have to be lucky enough to have someone invite you to join them.

Because of the short growing season, the traditional Inuit diet was heavily based on the results of the hunt, by land or sea. There are a few edible greens and berries gathered from the land in the summer, such as tart, lemony mountain sorrel, Labrador tea, Arctic blueberries and cranberries, and crowberries (often called “blackberries” by the Inuit due to their glossy dark colour, but not the same as blackberries in southern Canada). None of these are available fresh commercially, although there is a firm from Northern Quebec now marketing traditional Inuit herbal teas. In many parts of Nunavut the vegetation is very fragile, so visitors are asked not to pick berries on their own. It’s best to do so only if you are out with an Inuit outfitter or local family who knows the traditional berry-picking spots.

### Hotel and lodge food in the smaller communities

Oddly, in the smaller communities you are likely to find less traditional food on hotel or lodge menus, and more standard North American fare, most of it not enhanced by the distance it has travelled before being prepared. Many lodges cater primarily to construction workers, so their food is usually hearty and plentiful, but uninspired. It is also expensive due to the high

costs of importation. In many small communities there are no restaurant facilities outside the lodge. Check individual community listings for the food outlets available.

Campers and other visitors planning to prepare their own meals should come well supplied with food, particularly if specialized products like dehydrated camping food will be required. Vegetarians should also bring their own meat-substitute products, as these are not widely available.

The availability of fresh food like dairy products or fruits and vegetables is a function of flight schedules and weather delays. Although supplies are reliable in the communities with daily airline service, it is not uncommon for fresh milk, eggs or bread to be completely unavailable in a small community. Be prepared to pay \$2 for a single apple or orange in the more remote villages, and more than \$5 for a litre of milk. If you are coming to visit friends or family in Nunavut, among the best gifts you can bring are supplies of fresh fruit, vegetables and dairy products. These should be carried in hand luggage to protect them from freezing.

## Exporting food

Many “country foods” can be easily transported south, so you may want to share the taste of northern food with friends and family back home. Frozen food is almost always available at retail outlets and can often be obtained through local hunters and trappers associations as well. In some communities there are local businesses that specialize in providing country food. Some plants supply retail outlets rather than selling directly. If you purchase fish commercially from a retail outlet, you will not need an export permit, but you must keep your receipts as proof of purchase. All meats and marine mammal parts require export permits, but processed products like caribou jerky do not.

If you receive a gift of fish or any portion of a marine mammal (like *maktaaq*) from a beneficiary of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, that person must also write you a note saying that he or she is giving you such gifts. Otherwise, the activity is illegal.

Visitors must pick up an export permit in order to take home any part of a wild animal, such as meat, bone or fur, that has not been commercially processed or manufactured into something else. Export permits are free. For permits or information about export amounts, restrictions, and importing challenges, contact any community Department of Environment office. You can request their brochure, “Are you exporting wildlife from Nunavut?” which describes the basic regulations and provides contact numbers. A wildlife officer from the department can also give you an idea of whether you will have difficulty importing the food into your home province or country due to international conventions on trade in endangered species. It’s also a good idea to check on this point before you leave home, if you think you’ll be bringing food back with you. Slightly different regulations apply to hunters removing their catch. You may also remove fish you have caught without a permit, but must be prepared to show your fishing license. Again, consult a wildlife officer for details.

When carrying food in your luggage aboard an airline from the North, you may be asked to sign a waiver saying that if it spoils it is not insured by the airline. If you prefer, you can ship food home by cargo fridge/freezer. Check with your airline. However, unless you have extended travel plans with layovers in warm areas, food will usually stay quite well frozen if wrapped in several layers of newspaper, since the cargo hold is not heated while in the air.