



# shoppingguide

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*Who doesn't love* the idea of preparing fast, easy, fresh meals? The recipes in this cookbook have you covered on the “fast” and “easy” fronts. Now how about the “fresh?” Following is an overview on shopping for produce, cheeses, fish, poultry, and meats, as well as a guide to the ingredients used most frequently in this book. This should help you to select the freshest possible ingredients—and obtain the best possible results—as you prepare these fast and easy recipes.

#### **FRUITS AND VEGETABLES**

There has been an exciting boom in the growth of farmers' markets and CSAs (community supported agriculture) across the country, offering an expanding variety of fresh, local, and often organic produce. The food at farmers' markets has generally been picked that morning—it's hard to beat this kind of freshness unless you have your own garden.

But farmers' markets aren't available to everyone year-round, and for some they're not available at all. When shopping in a supermarket, opt for seasonal and local produce wherever possible; if it's organic, so much the better.

But beware of out-of-season organic produce: Most likely it has been shipped from another continent, so it is not only a few days older, but a lot of fossil fuels were used to get it to you.

A note on seasonality: In the ingredient guide on the following pages, we list the seasons in which fruits and vegetables are fresh. Many of these items are now available year-round (grapes, for instance)—but be aware that these fruits and vegetables do have a natural season during which the quality and variety will be at their peak.

#### **FISH AND SHELLFISH**

Years ago, we never thought twice about what kind of fish to have for dinner: We just bought what we liked or what was on sale. Now there are concerns about dwindling fish supplies, and questions about whether to buy farm-raised or wild-caught fish. The best guidelines come from the Monterey Bay Aquarium Foundation, available at [mbayaq.org](http://mbayaq.org). There are even region-specific printable pocket guides (updated every few months) that you can take to the store. The guides (or a knowledgeable fishmonger) can suggest substitutes for overfished or endangered fish—fortunately, there are still plenty of varieties in abundant supply.

**POULTRY**

Chicken, turkey, and egg production have become highly industrialized over the last few decades, but we're now witnessing a backlash against the use of antibiotics. We have found in the **BON APPÉTIT** Test Kitchen that organic chicken not only helps to keep the environment and our bodies healthier, it actually tastes better. If your market doesn't carry organic chicken, look for chicken that is

antibiotic-free. Kosher chicken is a great choice, but do not use kosher chickens in recipes that call for brining. Part of the koshering process entails a soak in a saltwater bath, and a second brining could make the dish too salty.

**BEEF**

Grass-fed and organic beef are becoming more and more popular—and for good reason: Cattle are *supposed* to eat grass. Studies are beginning to show that meat

from grass-fed cattle is not only lower in fat, but the fat has more of the healthy omega-3 fatty acids. If grass-fed or organic beef isn't available (or is too expensive), look for beef that has been raised without hormones and antibiotics, often labeled "natural beef," which is much easier to find.

Those are the broad strokes—now here's a guide to selecting many of the individual ingredients you'll find in this book.

## FRUITS

**Apples**

**SEASON:** Late summer and fall.

**SELECTING:** There are thousands of varieties of apples, with colors varying from deep green to rosy pink to dark burgundy. Each variety has its own flavor and texture, so it's important to use the type of apple called for in a recipe. Choose firm, heavy fruit without any wrinkles or bruises. Avoid any apples with tears or holes in the skin.

**STORING:** Apples will last for several weeks stored unwrapped in the refrigerator.

**USING:** Apples tend to brown quickly once exposed to the air, so cut them up just before using.

**Bananas**

**SEASON:** Fall and winter.

**SELECTING:** Perfectly ripe bananas are firm with yellow skin. Don't worry if there are only green bananas at the market. They will ripen when allowed to stand at room temperature for a few days.

**STORING:** Keep bananas in a well-ventilated spot at room temperature.

**USING:** If bananas are being used in baked goods like banana bread, use overripe bananas or bananas with lots of brown spots all over them. They will be very soft and sweet, and will impart the deep banana flavor desired in baked goods. Peeled overripe bananas can be stored in the freezer in resealable plastic bags for later use.



## Berries

**SEASON:** Spring (strawberries), summer into fall (blackberries, blueberries, raspberries).

**SELECTING:** The freshest berries will have a deeply sweet and floral aroma and look like they are bursting with juices. Avoid any with green on them—they're underripe.

**STORING:** Store berries in the refrigerator. If you need to hold them for more than a day, line an airtight container with paper towels, add unrinsed berries in a single layer, and top with another paper towel or two to absorb additional moisture and prevent molding. Seal the container and chill; the berries should last up to five days.

**USING:** Rinse berries just before using, not before storing, to help prevent mold from developing. Remove the hull, if necessary, before using.

## Citrus

**SEASON:** Late spring and summer (limes), year-round (oranges, lemons, grapefruit).

**SELECTING:** Select fruit that feels heavy for its size—a sure sign that it is fresh and packed with

juice. The fruit should be firm, especially if the peel is being used in a recipe. Softer fruits are difficult to grate and peel, but may be perfect for juicing.

**STORING:** Citrus fruits can be stored uncovered at room temperature for several days or can last for several weeks when stored uncovered in the refrigerator.

**USING:** Scrub the fruit if using the peel in a recipe. When the peel is required, use only the colored part, leaving the bitter white pith behind.

## Cranberries

**SEASON:** Fall.

**SELECTING:** Color will vary in this classic holiday fruit. The whiter berries tend to be a bit milder, while the dark red ones have a deep cranberry flavor. Cranberries should be full and firm, and show no signs of brown or soft spots. Fresh cranberries will bounce when dropped.

**STORING:** Store cranberries in plastic bags in the refrigerator for up to one month.

**USING:** This is one fruit that freezes beautifully. Keep the fruit frozen and use as directed in the recipe.

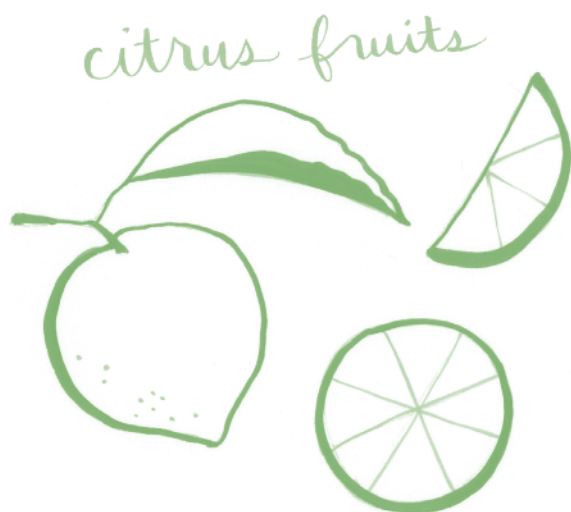
## Dates

**SEASON:** Late summer to mid-fall, year-round for dried dates.

**SELECTING:** There are many varieties of dates, but the Medjool (large and very moist) and the Deglet Noor (medium size, slightly firm, with drier skin) are the most common. There are many other varieties available, especially if you visit a Middle Eastern market or a farmers' market.

**STORING:** Fresh dates, wrapped in plastic, can last in the refrigerator for about two weeks. The more commonly found dried dates can be stored in a cool dry place for about one month or in the refrigerator for several months.

**USING:** Remove the pit before using.





## Figs

**SEASON:** Summer and fall, year-round for dried figs.

**SELECTING:** Fresh figs have a sweet scent and should feel soft when they are pressed with your fingertip. The best dried figs are sticky and moist.

**STORING:** Fresh figs can be stored at room temperature for a few days and up to a week in the refrigerator. Dried figs can be stored tightly wrapped at room temperature for several months.

**USING:** Trim the stem before using. Except for the stem, the entire fruit is edible.

## Grapes

**SEASON:** Summer and fall.

**SELECTING:** Check grapes where the stems and the fruit meet: There should be no wrinkling or browning. Avoid any bunches with brown or mushy grapes attached.

**STORING:** Place the grapes in plastic bags and store them in the refrigerator for up to one week.

**USING:** Remove the stems before using.

## Kiwis

**SEASON:** Winter.

**SELECTING:** Ripe kiwis should be firm without any soft spots, but should yield slightly when pressed gently with your thumb.

**STORING:** If the kiwis are still a bit firm, let them stand at room temperature for a few days or until ripe. Once ripe, store kiwis in the refrigerator for up to a week.

**USING:** Peel the fuzzy skin from the kiwi before using. Or for a quick snack, cut the kiwi in half crosswise and scoop out the green flesh with a spoon.

## Mangoes

**SEASON:** Spring.

**SELECTING:** Mangoes should give just a bit when pressed with your thumb and should feel heavy for their size when held in your hand. The green-and-orange variety most commonly available in stores can often be stringy, but many supermarkets now carry other varieties, such as Champagne and Honey, which are worth trying.

**STORING:** Store mangoes at room temperature until ripe, then refrigerate for up to five days.

**USING:** Cut the flesh away from the large narrow pit in the center of the fruit, then peel and use as directed.

## Melons

**SEASON:** Summer into fall.

**SELECTING:** There are two different types of melons, and each has its own test for ripeness. The ribbed or scaly skin varieties, such as cantaloupe, have net-like or scaly ridges that cover the skin. These melons are the easiest to choose because they will smell sweet when fully ripe. The stem end of the melon should give slightly when pressed with your thumb. With

smooth-skinned melons, such as watermelon and crenshaw, the best bet is to pick one that is heavy for its size, and to listen for a hollow sound (not a dull thud) when you thump it. For both types, check for a yellow (not white) spot on one side of the melon. This shows that the melon rested longer on the ground, indicating that it had a chance to ripen on the vine.

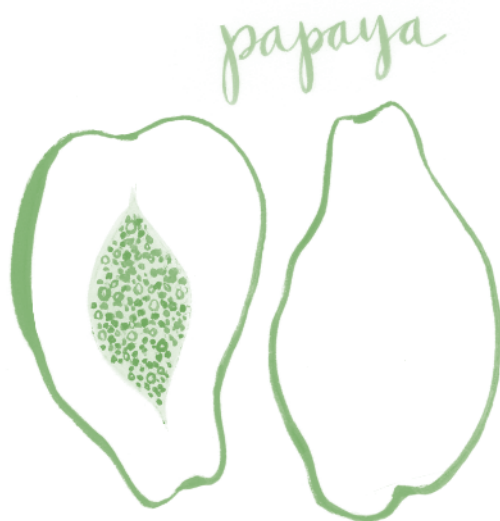
**STORING:** Melons can be stored at room temperature for a few days to ripen. When ripe, transfer to the refrigerator. If you'd like, cut up the melon before refrigerating it, place melon pieces in a bowl, then cover and chill for a day or two.

**USING:** Except for watermelon, scoop out the seeds from the center of the melon before using. Remove the peel before eating.

## Papayas

**SEASON:** Spring and fall.

**SELECTING:** Ripe papayas give slightly when pressed at the narrow end of the fruit, or the whole fruit may give slightly when squeezed. The skin will be yellow and may have a few small brown spots on it.



**STORING:** Store papayas at room temperature until ripe. Once ripe, they can be stored in the refrigerator for a day or two.

**USING:** Cut the papaya in half and scoop out the small round black seeds. Remove the skin before eating.

## Pears

**SEASON:** Late summer through early spring.

**SELECTING:** There are many varieties of pears, each with its own distinct beauty, flavor, and season. Choose pears with a delicate aroma and no blemishes or soft spots. The skin should be taut without any wrinkling around the stem end. Ripe pears feel heavy for their size and give slightly when pressure is applied to the stem end.

**STORING:** Pears can be stored at room temperature until ripe and then transferred to the refrigerator for a few days.

**USING:** Remove the core before using. Peeling is optional.

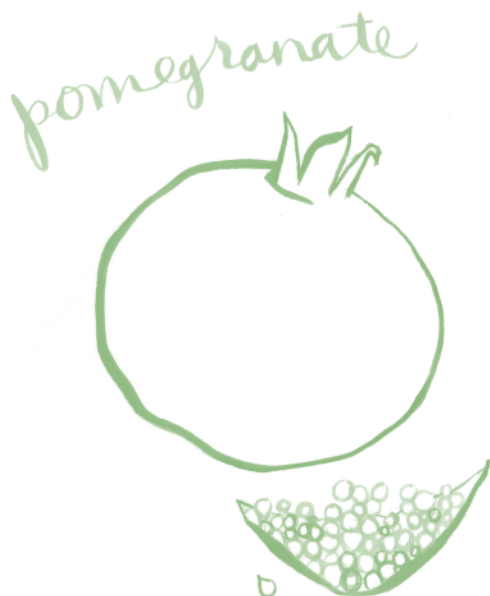
## Pineapples

**SEASON:** Winter to midsummer.

**SELECTING:** A ripe pineapple has a splendid aroma and yellow skin with tinges of brown, along with green leaves.

**STORING:** Store pineapples at room temperature to ripen if necessary.

**USING:** Cut away the thick skin and remove the core before using. Fresh pineapple chunks can be stored in a sealed container in the refrigerator for a few days.



## Pomegranates

**SEASON:** Fall.

**SELECTING:** Since some varieties of pomegranate have pink skin and others have deep red skin, and because they don't smell sweet when they are ripe, it can be tricky to pick out a ripe one. The best method is to select fruit that is heavy for its size. Pomegranates do not ripen after being picked.

**STORING:** Whole pomegranates can be stored in a cool dry place for up to one month or in the refrigerator for up to two months. The seeds can be removed and frozen for several months.

**USING:** The seeds are the only edible part of the pomegranate. The skin is tough and leathery, and the white membrane that covers the seeds is bitter and astringent. Wear an apron and gloves when removing seeds from a pomegranate—the juices can stain clothes and skin. Prepackaged seeds are available at many supermarkets and are a great time-saver.

## Stone fruits

**SEASON:** Late spring into midsummer (apricots), summer (cherries, nectarines, peaches).

**SELECTING:** Stone fruits should be firm and plump with juices and feel heavy. They should smell sweet and floral. Look for deep rich color. Cherries should have supple stems attached. Peaches, nectarines, and apricots should not have any green spots on them, even at the stem end; this is a sign that the fruit was picked too early and may never ripen properly.

**STORING:** Store stone fruits at room temperature for a day or two if not completely ripe, then refrigerate for up to three days.

**USING:** Remove the pits before using. Peeling is optional.

# VEGETABLES

## Asparagus

**SEASON:** Spring.

**SELECTING:** Asparagus tips should be tightly bundled and show no signs of sprouting or softening. Look for firm stalks without any wrinkles. The cut ends of fresh asparagus will be moist.

**STORING:** If not using asparagus right away, cut the bottom inch off the stalks and place cut side down in a glass filled with an inch of water. Cover loosely with a plastic bag and store in the refrigerator for a few days.

**USING:** Trim the ends of the stalks. Peel thick asparagus with a vegetable peeler to remove the tough skin. Thin asparagus does not need to be peeled. They're both delicious; just be sure to cook thin and thick stalks separately, as cooking times will vary.



## Avocados

**SEASON:** Year-round.

**SELECTING:** Avocados are picked when still hard and green, but they will ripen when allowed to sit at room temperature. The skin of some avocado varieties will darken to almost black when ripe. The fruit should feel firm and give slightly when pressed gently with your thumb. Avoid any avocados with hollow pockets between the skin and the flesh.

**STORING:** Let avocados stand at room temperature until they are ripe, and then transfer them to the refrigerator. Ripe avocados will last several days when chilled.

**USING:** Avocados brown rapidly once they are cut. A good, simple do-ahead trick when using diced or sliced avocados in a recipe: Run the cut avocados under water, then cover and chill. The avocado will not brown for several hours. If the avocado is mashed, as for guacamole, a squirt of lemon or lime juice will help prevent it from turning brown. Store any leftovers in the refrigerator with plastic wrap pressed directly on top of the guacamole.

## Beans (Green and Yellow)

**SEASON:** Spring through summer.

**SELECTING:** Fresh beans will snap crisply in two, and may even have small white flowers still attached. Avoid any beans with brown spots.

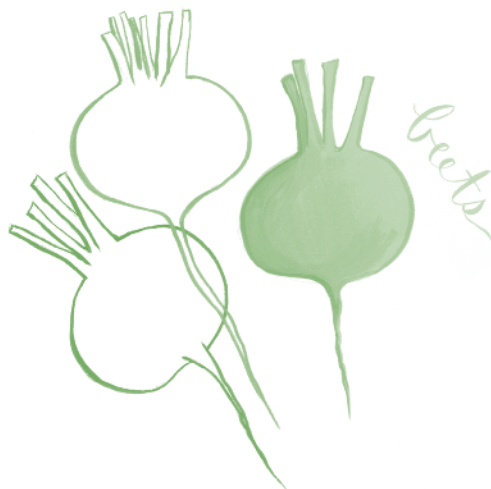
**STORING:** Beans can be stored in plastic bags in the refrigerator for three to five days.

**USING:** The stem end needs to be trimmed just before using, either by snapping it off or trimming it with a knife. The slender wispy end can be trimmed or left intact as a matter of preference.

## Beets

**SEASON:** Summer.

**SELECTING:** They aren't just purple anymore. Now there are golden, white, red, and Chioggia beets, sometimes called "candy cane" for their interior pink and white stripes. With the fabulous variety available at many supermarkets and farmers' markets, any recipe calling for beets can become a thing of colorful beauty. Look for beets with their greens still attached. The beets should have smooth skins without blemishes, cracks, or many hairy roots attached.



**STORING:** Just after purchasing, cut off all but two inches of the greens—but don't discard them. They are delicious when quickly sautéed, and are packed with vitamins and minerals. Store the beets and greens separately in the refrigerator for several days.

**USING:** Cook beets unpeeled. Leave a few inches of the stems and the root end attached to prevent loss of color and flavor. Peel and trim beets after cooking. It's a good idea to put on a pair of plastic gloves before peeling red beets to avoid staining hands.

## Broccoli

**SEASON:** Year-round.

**SELECTING:** The freshest broccoli has firm stalks with tender skin. The cut end should be moist. The buds on top should be tight and show no signs of yellow flowering.

**STORING:** Store unwashed broccoli for a few days in a plastic bag in the refrigerator.

**USING:** Trim the stalks before using. If the skin on the stalks is woody and tough, it can be peeled off and discarded. Otherwise the stalk can be peeled, sliced, and cooked along with the florets.

## Broccoli Rabe

**SEASON:** Fall through spring.

**SELECTING:** Broccoli rabe (also called *rapini*) looks like leafy underdeveloped broccoli, although it is not related. Look for bunches with long stalks and leaves that aren't wilted or yellowing. The stalks may have a few yellow flowers attached.

**STORING:** Wrap in plastic bags and refrigerate for a few days.

**USING:** Trim the ends of the stalks and remove any yellowed leaves before cooking. Use both the stalks and the pungent-tasting leaves.

## Cabbages and Brussels Sprouts

**SEASON:** Summer (Chinese cabbages), fall and winter (cabbages and brussels sprouts).

**SELECTING:** The heads of round cabbages, such as red and green cabbage, as well as brussels sprouts, should be tightly packed and give only slightly when squeezed. Chinese cabbages, such as bok choy and Napa cabbage, are leafier and will be tight only at the base. The leaves should be crisp and show no signs of wilting or browning around the edges.

**STORING:** Place cabbages in plastic bags and store in the refrigerator. Chinese cabbages can be stored for several days. Although best within a few days of purchase, large round cabbages and brussels sprouts can be refrigerated for up to two weeks.

**USING:** Cabbage can be eaten raw, cooked in a variety of ways, and pickled. Remove any wilted outer leaves, if necessary.



## Carrots

**SEASON:** Year-round.

**SELECTING:** Here's another vegetable that can now be found in a variety of colors such as white, yellow, red, and purple. The freshest carrots are brightly colored with the greens still attached. The tops should be vibrant green, not yellow or limp. If you stick your thumbnail into a fresh carrot, it should be juicy. Be wary of packages marked "baby carrots"; often they are just large older carrots cut into small pieces.

**STORING:** Remove the greens, leaving about two inches from the top of the carrots. Store carrots in plastic bags in the refrigerator for up to two weeks.

**USING:** Whether to scrub or peel carrots before cooking is a matter of preference, but do not peel baby carrots or you may find that there's not much left afterward. However, it is important to scrub and not peel red carrots: Their beauty really is only skin deep—peeling them will leave you with an orange carrot.

## Cauliflower

**SEASON:** Year-round.

**SELECTING:** Purchase cauliflower without any brown or black spots. The leaves should be crisp and pale green, and the cut end should be moist. Cauliflower comes in the standard white, as well as in purple, orange, and green.

**STORING:** Cauliflower can be stored in plastic bags in the refrigerator for a few days.

**USING:** Remove the core and leaves of large heads of cauliflower and separate the head into florets. Baby varieties can be steamed or roasted whole with leaves intact.

## Celery Root (Celeriac)

**SEASON:** Fall.

**SELECTING:** It's hard to believe that underneath all of that rough, gnarly skin lies a versatile vegetable with such a delicate flavor. Try to find celery root with the dark green leaves attached and showing no signs of wilting or browning. Avoid any with soft spots on the outside, as this is a sign of rotting. Choose roots that are about 4 to 5 inches in diameter and heavy for their size. Very large ones tend to have woody cores.

**STORING:** Keep uncovered celery root in the refrigerator for a day or two.

**USING:** Celery root browns quickly once exposed to air. Either cut celery root just before using or place cut pieces into a bowl of cold water with a splash of lemon juice to prevent browning.

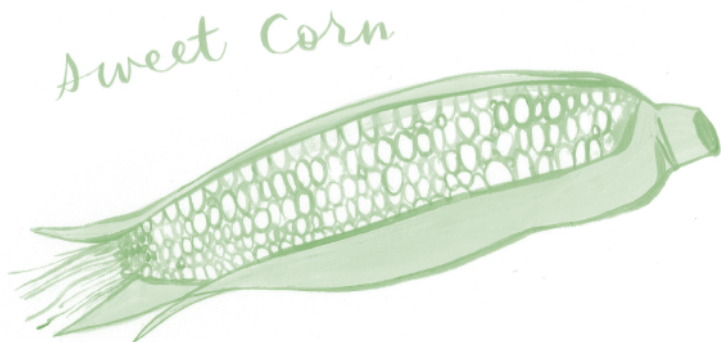
## Corn

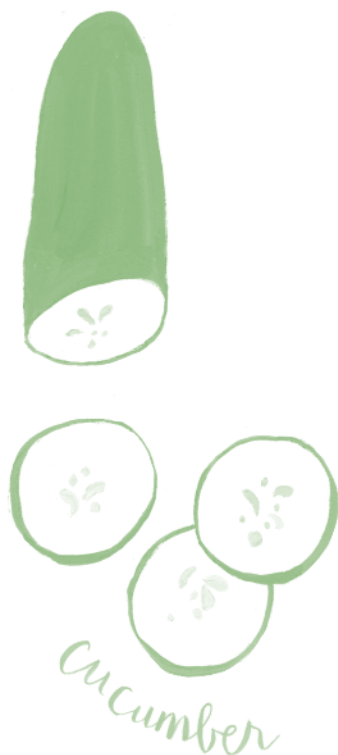
**SEASON:** Summer.

**SELECTING:** The freshest corn will have bright green husks that show no signs of browning at the edges. The silks should be golden at the tips, not brown or black. Peel down the husk just an inch or two to check that the kernels are fully developed and are formed in straight, tight rows. The kernels should be plump, and juicy if pierced with your nail.

**STORING:** Corn is best cooked the day it is picked. Store unwrapped in the refrigerator.

**USING:** Since the husk helps to keep the corn moist, it is best to wait and husk corn just before using.





## Cucumber

**SEASON:** Summer.

**SELECTING:** Choose firm cucumbers that aren't wrinkled at the ends.

**STORING:** Cucumbers can be stored, unwashed, wrapped in plastic for a few days in the refrigerator.

**USING:** Cucumbers with dark thick skin are often waxed to prevent moisture loss. The skin can be unpleasant to eat, so it is best to peel this variety. These cucumbers often have large seeds that are easily scraped out with a spoon. Thin-skinned cucumbers, such as Persian, Japanese, and English hothouse cucumbers, do not need to be peeled or seeded. Be sure to wrap any unused portions tightly in plastic before refrigerating.

## Eggplant

**SEASON:** Summer.

**SELECTING:** Eggplant that is heavy for its size is the freshest. Look for firm, taut skin without any bruising or discoloration. (Eggplant is actually a fruit but is usually thought of as a vegetable—hence the categorization.)

**STORING:** Eggplant will last about four days when stored in the refrigerator wrapped in plastic.

**USING:** Eggplant is always cooked. The skin is edible, so peeling is a matter of preference.

## Fennel

**SEASON:** Fall to spring.

**SELECTING:** Choose white bulbs with pale green accents. Avoid any bulbs that have brown spots. When purchasing fennel from the supermarket, the tops will have been removed. If the fronds are needed for a recipe, ask the produce manager for tops. They usually have some available in the back of the store.

**STORING:** If bulbs are purchased with tops attached, cut tops away and store leafy green fronds and bulbs separately in the refrigerator for a few days.

**USING:** If any small brown spots develop, they can be removed with a vegetable peeler, if necessary.



## Garlic

**SEASON:** Summer.

**SELECTING:** The whole head of garlic should feel firm when given a good squeeze in the palm of your hand. There should be no sign of green sprouts emerging from the top of the bulb. Check to be sure that there are no cloves that look brown or concave.

**STORING:** Store garlic in a dark, well-ventilated area at room temperature.

**USING:** Garlic that has been smashed or chopped needs to be refrigerated if not being used right away.

## Ginger

**SEASON:** Fall.

**SELECTING:** Look for firm knobs with dry, pale yellow skin that shows no sign of wrinkles or mold.

**STORING:** Ginger can be stored at room temperature for several days or unwrapped in the refrigerator for about two weeks.

**USING:** Peel ginger before using.



## Greens (Swiss Chard, Collard Greens, Dandelion, Kale, Mustard Greens)

**SEASON:** Winter into spring (collard greens, dandelion, mustard greens), summer (Swiss chard), winter (kale).

**SELECTING:** Purchase crisp, vibrantly colored greens that don't have any brown spots or signs of wilting.

**STORING:** Store greens in plastic bags in the refrigerator. If there is moisture on the leaves from supermarket misters, wrap them in a paper towel first, then in plastic to keep them crisp and fresh and to prevent rotting. Greens will last three to five days in the refrigerator.

**USING:** Trim the tough stalk from greens before using. The stalks can be eaten, but need a very long cooking time, whereas the leaves cook quickly.

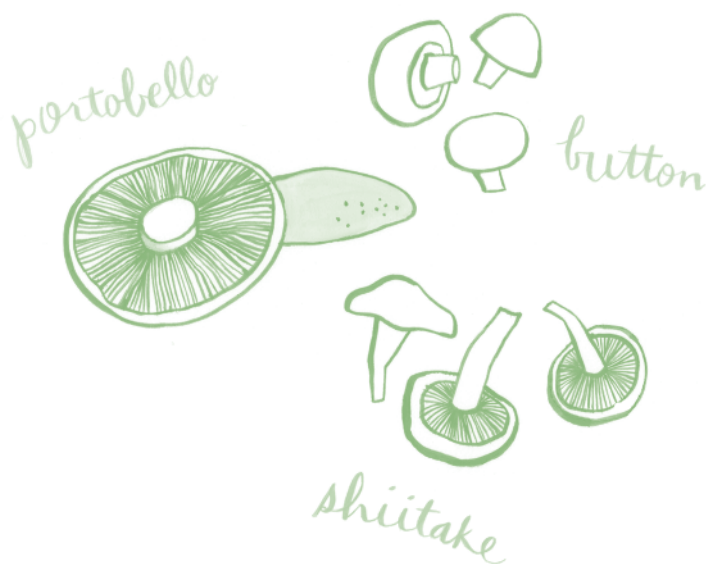
## Lettuces

**SEASON:** Spring (baby lettuces, watercress), summer into fall (arugula, escarole), fall to spring (Belgian endive), winter to spring (chicory, mâche, radicchio).

**SELECTING:** Purchase lettuces that are pert and crisp and show no signs of wilting or browning around the edges.

**STORING:** All lettuce should be wrapped in plastic and stored in the refrigerator, except for watercress, which should be stored in the refrigerator, leaves down in a bowl of cold water. If lettuce has any moisture clinging to the leaves, place a paper towel in the plastic bag to absorb moisture and prevent the lettuce from wilting and browning. Some lettuces, such as endive, are sold in containers with absorbent pads inside to soak up any excess moisture.

**USING:** Tender lettuce leaves, such as butter and red leaf lettuce, need to be torn gently to prevent damage to the leaves. Tougher leaves, such as romaine and iceberg, can be chopped with a knife if being used within a few hours. Be sure to check the expiration date on prepackaged lettuce before using.



## Mushrooms

**SEASON:** Commercially cultivated year-round; spring (wild morels), fall (oyster mushrooms).

**SELECTING:** Choose mushrooms with smooth caps and edges that curl under; a flat top is a sign of age. Mushrooms should not feel at all slimy, but rather smooth and slightly moist.

**STORING:** Store mushrooms in brown paper bags in the refrigerator for just a few days.

**USING:** There is a lot of debate about how to clean mushrooms. Never soak mushrooms in water: They are like sponges and will soak up the water. Instead, quickly rinse dirty mushrooms under cold running water, or use a damp towel to wipe off cleaner mushrooms. Pat mushrooms dry before using. Avoid mushroom brushes—not only are they ineffective, but they also tend to cause scratching.

Mushroom stems are edible, with the exception of shiitake mushroom stems, which must be removed before using, as they become tough and inedible when cooked. All other mushroom stems simply need to be trimmed.

## Onions and Leeks

**SEASON:** Spring to summer (Vidalia onions, green onions), summer to fall (red, white, yellow storage onions), winter (leeks).

**SELECTING:** Choose onions that are firm and heavy for their size. There shouldn't be any green sprouts coming out of the tops. The skin should be dry without any sign of black mold. Green onions and leeks should be chosen for their fresh root ends and deep green tops.

**STORING:** Most onions can be stored at room temperature in a dark, well-ventilated area for about a month. Green onions and leeks should be stored in plastic bags in the refrigerator for up to five days.

**USING:** Before using, remove peel and root end from onions. The root ends of green onions and leeks should also be trimmed and discarded just before using. Leeks require thorough washing, as the leaves trap grit.

## Parsnips

**SEASON:** Fall and winter.

**SELECTING:** Choose parsnips that are pale yellow in color, firm, and clean of any hairy root sprouts. Purchase parsnips that are less than ten inches long, as larger parsnips tend to be tough and woody.

**STORING:** Store parsnips in plastic bags in the refrigerator for up to two weeks.

**USING:** Parsnips are always cooked. Trim and peel parsnips before using.

## Peas

**SEASON:** Spring.

**SELECTING:** Sugar snap pea, snow pea, and English pea pods should be crisp and snap easily in half. The pods should show no signs of wrinkling, but don't worry if they are a bit scratched. Pea sprouts and their older siblings, pea shoots, should be bright green and show no sign of wilting. If possible, purchase pea shoots with flowers on them. Not only are they pretty, but they are delicious, too, with the flavor of fresh peas.

**STORING:** All peas, pea sprouts, and pea tendrils should be wrapped in plastic and stored in the refrigerator after purchasing. Pea shoots, pea sprouts, and English peas should be used the same day that they are purchased. The sugar in English peas begins to turn to starch as soon as it is picked, but chilling will slow down this transformation. Sugar snap peas and snow peas can be stored for a few days wrapped in plastic in the refrigerator.

**USING:** It's best to shuck and cook English peas the same day that they are purchased. Be sure to pull the strings from along the sides of sugar snap and snow peas before cooking.

## Peppers (Sweet and Hot)

**SEASON:** Summer into fall.

**SELECTING:** Choose peppers that are deeply colored—they will be more flavorful (this is especially true of red peppers). All peppers should be firm when squeezed, and free of wrinkles or cracks.

**STORING:** Store peppers in plastic bags in the refrigerator. They should last about one week.

**USING:** Stem and seed peppers before using. Hot peppers, such as jalapeños, can vary in heat. It's a good idea to start by adding a small amount to the recipe, and then taste and add more as desired. The seeds of hot peppers are often used in recipes.

## Potatoes

**SEASON:** Fall, except russets (year-round), new potatoes (spring to early summer), and specialty potatoes (check supermarkets and farmers' markets).

**SELECTING:** Purchase potatoes with smooth skins that are not sprouting or beginning to turn green. Avoid potatoes with any nicks or brown spots.

**STORING:** Keep potatoes in a cool, dark, well-ventilated place away from onions. Do not store potatoes in the refrigerator. Chilling turns the starches into sugar, producing unappetizing flavors.

**USING:** Scrub potatoes before using. Be sure to scrub freshly dug potatoes gently, as the skin will come off easily.

## Radishes

**SEASON:** Winter and spring.

**SELECTING:** Choose radishes with vibrant dark green tops that do not have any brown or wilted leaves. The radishes should not be cracked, and should feel firm when squeezed.

**STORING:** Place radishes in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to a week. If not using right away, cut the greens off before storing.

**USING:** Be sure to lightly scrub the radishes just before using to remove any soil.



## Spinach

**SEASON:** Spring.

**SELECTING:** Fresh spinach should be vibrant green without any dark spots. It should be crisp and show no signs of wilting. A great convenience product of the last decade is the pre-washed spinach sold in plastic bags. Be sure to check the expiration date printed on the bag.

**STORING:** Store spinach wrapped in plastic bags in the refrigerator, where it will last for a few days. If the spinach is damp from supermarket misters, place a paper towel inside the bag to absorb moisture and prevent rotting.

**USING:** Trim any tough stems. If purchasing fresh spinach, be sure to wash the spinach well. Fill a sink with water, then place trimmed spinach leaves into the water. The sand will settle to the bottom of the sink. Lift the spinach out of the sink, and repeat until the water is clean.

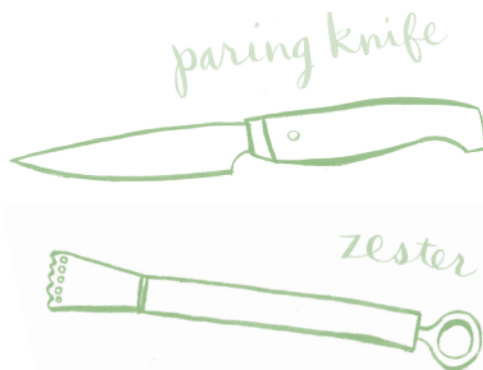
## Squash (Summer)

**SEASON:** Summer.

**SELECTING:** Although large squash look dramatic, they are very disappointing when cooked. Choose small- to medium-size squash for the best flavor and texture. Fresh squash will have smooth skin absent of any nicks or wrinkling.

**STORING:** Keep squash wrapped in plastic bags in the refrigerator. They should last for several days and up to one week. Place squash blossoms in plastic and store in the refrigerator. Squash blossoms must be used the day that they are picked.

**USING:** Rinse well and trim stem ends of squash before cooking. The stamen should be removed from inside squash blossoms before using.



## Squash (Winter)

**SEASON:** Fall and winter.

**SELECTING:** Choose squash that are heavy for their size and without any damage to the skin. If the recipe calls for butternut squash, you can buy time-saving pre-cut and peeled squash in plastic-wrapped packages at many supermarkets.

**STORING:** You can store most whole squash in a cool dark place up to one month, but thinner-skinned squash like delicata need to be eaten within a week. Be sure to store cut squash in the refrigerator and use it within a day or two.

**USING:** The seeds of winter squash can be removed either before cooking or after.

## Sweet Potatoes

**SEASON:** Fall.

**SELECTING:** Choose small- or medium-size sweet potatoes with smooth skin—avoid those with bruises, tears, or wrinkles.

**STORING:** You can keep them in a cool, dark, dry place for up to one month (don't refrigerate them), but it's best to use them within a week.

**USING:** Pale-skinned sweet potatoes with pale yellow flesh can substitute for regular potatoes in recipes. Dark-skinned sweet potatoes with bright orange flesh (often mistakenly called yams) have a much moister texture and sweeter flavor. Both varieties should be scrubbed before using.



## Tomatoes

**SEASON:** Summer.

**SELECTING:** Tomatoes (another fruit that's usually thought of as a vegetable) come in all different colors and sizes. Choose firm plump tomatoes that are heavy for their size and give slightly when pressed with your thumb. Avoid any with wrinkles or bruises. Aside from the Green Zebra tomato (an heirloom variety that is green when ripe) avoid tomatoes with green on them, a sign that they were picked too early—unless you're making fried green tomatoes, in which case you want the greenest, firmest tomatoes you can find.

**STORING:** Keep tomatoes at room temperature, avoiding direct sunlight. Do not store tomatoes in the refrigerator: This will give them a mealy texture and will alter their flavor.

**USING:** Remove stem and core from tomatoes before using.

## HERBS

**SEASON:** Spring and summer.

**SELECTING:** Choose herbs that are aromatic. The leaves should be pert without any brown spots or signs of wilting. Avoid herbs that have begun to flower, which causes the flavor to diminish. The flowers on herbs are edible, however, and can make a lovely garnish.

**STORING:** Basil, cilantro, and parsley should be stored at room temperature with the trimmed stems submerged in a glass of water. If herbs such as chives, thyme, and rosemary will be used within a day, wrap in a damp paper towel, then place in a sealed plastic bag and chill. If not, trim ends and place them in a glass of water. Tent with a plastic bag and refrigerate for up to five days.

**USING:** Remove the tough stems from fresh herbs before using. Any tender stem ends can be chopped up and used.



cheese



## CHEESES

**SELECTING:** Follow the sell-by dates on packaged cheese. Avoid cheese that looks dry or brittle, or that has any sign of molding, which can show itself with yellow or green streaking or coating. If possible, get to know a cheesemonger. They are often eager to offer samples and will help you choose the right cheeses for a recipe or a cheese plate.

**STORING:** If storing cheese for periods of time longer than a day or two, remove it from the original wrapper. Hard cheeses, such as Parmesan and ricotta salata, need to be wrapped in plastic or stored in plastic resealable bags to retain moisture. Semi-hard cheeses, such as cheddar and Swiss, can be stored in either waxed or parchment paper, or if you are concerned about the cheese drying out, it can also be wrapped in plastic wrap. Wrap semi-soft

cheeses, such as Havarti, Gorgonzola, and Muenster, in parchment or waxed paper to allow it to breathe. You may need to rewrap it occasionally to keep it fresh. Unless it is in a shrink-wrap package (as with fresh goat cheese) or already in a plastic resealable container (as with mascarpone), soft cheeses, such as Brie, young blue cheese, and fresh mozzarella, should be stored in plastic resealable containers. It is important to check cheese occasionally for signs of molding. If there is any mold, trim it away and store the cheese in fresh, clean wrappers or containers.

**USING:** Remove any hard rinds from cheeses such as Parmesan. Store the rinds wrapped tightly in plastic and freeze for later use in soups or sauces. If grating or cutting up a soft or semi-soft cheese, a 30-minute stint in the freezer makes the job a lot easier. If serving cheese on a cheese plate or as part of a composed salad, let the cheese come to room temperature for the best flavor.

## SHELLFISH

**SELECTING:** Be sure to purchase fish from a reliable source. All shellfish still in their shells must be alive before cooking. A sign that shellfish in the shell are still alive is to give the shell a tap; it will close up quickly. Shells should not be cracked. When purchasing shellfish out of the shell, the freshest will smell sweet, not fishy. When purchasing scallops, try to find dry pack scallops. These are scallops that haven't been soaked in a solution that artificially plumps them up and turns the scallops white. Look for scallops that are plump, moist, and slightly translucent-looking. Most shrimp have been frozen and defrosted, so don't turn your nose up if it's labeled "frozen/defrosted." (It's also handy to have bags of frozen shrimp available to add to all kinds of dishes.)

**STORING:** Store all fresh shellfish over ice and covered in the refrigerator. Use within one day.

**USING:** Scrub shells well to remove any algae and sand. Remove the beard from mussels. Remove the small side muscle from scallops, since it gets tough when cooked. Discard any shellfish that do not open after cooking. This is a sign that they were dead before cooking.



Coho salmon



## FISH

**SELECTING:** It is important to purchase fish from a reliable source, where you know you are getting the freshest top-quality fish. Purchase fillets that look moist and smell fresh—there should be no fishy or ammonia odor. Whole fish should have eyes that are bright, not cloudy or sunken. The gills should be bright red, and the fish should not feel slimy.

**STORING:** Store fish in the refrigerator wrapped in plastic over a bed of ice for no more than a day or two.

**USING:** Rinse and pat fish dry before using.

## POULTRY

**SELECTING:** If purchasing prepackaged poultry, be sure that it is tightly wrapped without any tears or holes in the packaging. Chicken should not be sticky to the touch or have any off odor.

**STORING:** Follow the sell-by date on wrapped packages of chicken. Poultry purchased from a butcher can be stored in the coldest part of the refrigerator for two to three days.

**USING:** Pat chicken dry before using.

# MEATS

**SELECTING:** Beef and lamb should be a deep—but not cherry—red. There should be no signs of gray or purple colored flesh. Pork and veal should be rosy pink, not pale or gray. All meat should be firm; avoid any that feels soft or mushy. Look for nicely marbled cuts of meat, with fine lines of white fat throughout, ensuring a moist and flavorful dish. If purchasing prepackaged meat, be sure that it is tightly wrapped without any tears or holes in the plastic wrap.

**STORING:** Meats should be tightly wrapped and stored in the coldest part of your refrigerator.

**USING:** Use meat on or before the sell-by date listed on the package. If purchasing meat from a butcher, use within three days. Ground meats and fresh sausages should be used within one day of purchase. Be sure to follow the use-by dates on fully cooked sausages. Because differ-

ent cuts of meat can require different cooking methods, it's important to use the cut that is called for in the recipe to ensure a successful result.



***Making the grade*** When buying beef, veal, and lamb in retail stores, you'll find them categorized by USDA grades, which indicate (among other things) marbling (the streaks and speckles of fat within the meat) and therefore their expected tenderness, juiciness, and amount of flavor.

Beef may be marked Prime, Choice, or Select. Most veal and lamb in retail stores is marked either Prime or Choice. Pork isn't given USDA quality grades, as it generally comes from young animals that produce uniformly tender meat.

- Prime grade meat has the best marbling, which means it will be supremely tender, juicy, and flavorful. Only a small percentage of meat is prime—so it's more expensive and usually snapped up by restaurants—but you can find it at high-quality butcher shops and specialty markets. **PREPARATION:** Season minimally with salt, pepper, and a light drizzling of olive oil so that the flavor of the meat is not disguised, and use a quick, dry-heat cooking method.
- Choice grade is very high-quality meat, but has less marbling. **PREPARATION:** Choice roasts and steaks from the loin and rib are quite tender, juicy, and flavorful, and work well with dry-heat cooking. Even many less-tender cuts, such as those from the rump or round, can be cooked with dry heat, as long as you don't overcook them.
- Select grade beef is leaner than Prime and Choice, but still very good quality and widely available at supermarkets. **PREPARATION:** It is fairly tender, but with less marbling the meat has less flavor and juiciness, making it well suited for marinades, rubs, and barbecue sauces, which bolster the flavor.