

Far North Food

- From Arctic Char to Processed Snacks

If you think about foreign countries and what the people eat, it might all seem, well... different.

But if you think about the people living in certain coastal areas of Canada, eating fresh raw oysters, you may find this different too.

We don't think about it, but our eating habits are influenced by the world around us — by our families, friends, the areas we live in and the commercials we see. We eat what we are used to, and often stay away from anything that seems too out of the ordinary.

While you eat a hamburger and fries, a young Inuit from Arctic Canada might be eating fresh caribou or char (a northern fish). Not long ago, Inuit foods came entirely from the land and waters. Even though many Inuit (both young and old) continue to enjoy traditional foods, they are no longer able to live entirely off the land.



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Their traditional diet was both healthy and unique. No one - not even the First Nations people to the south - ate the same foods in the same way. It provided the Inuit with everything they needed to survive in one of the coldest climates on earth, but the importance of their diet went beyond food. It also gave them materials for making clothing, tents, kayaks, bowstrings, harpoon lines and tools. Hunters used as much of an animal as possible.

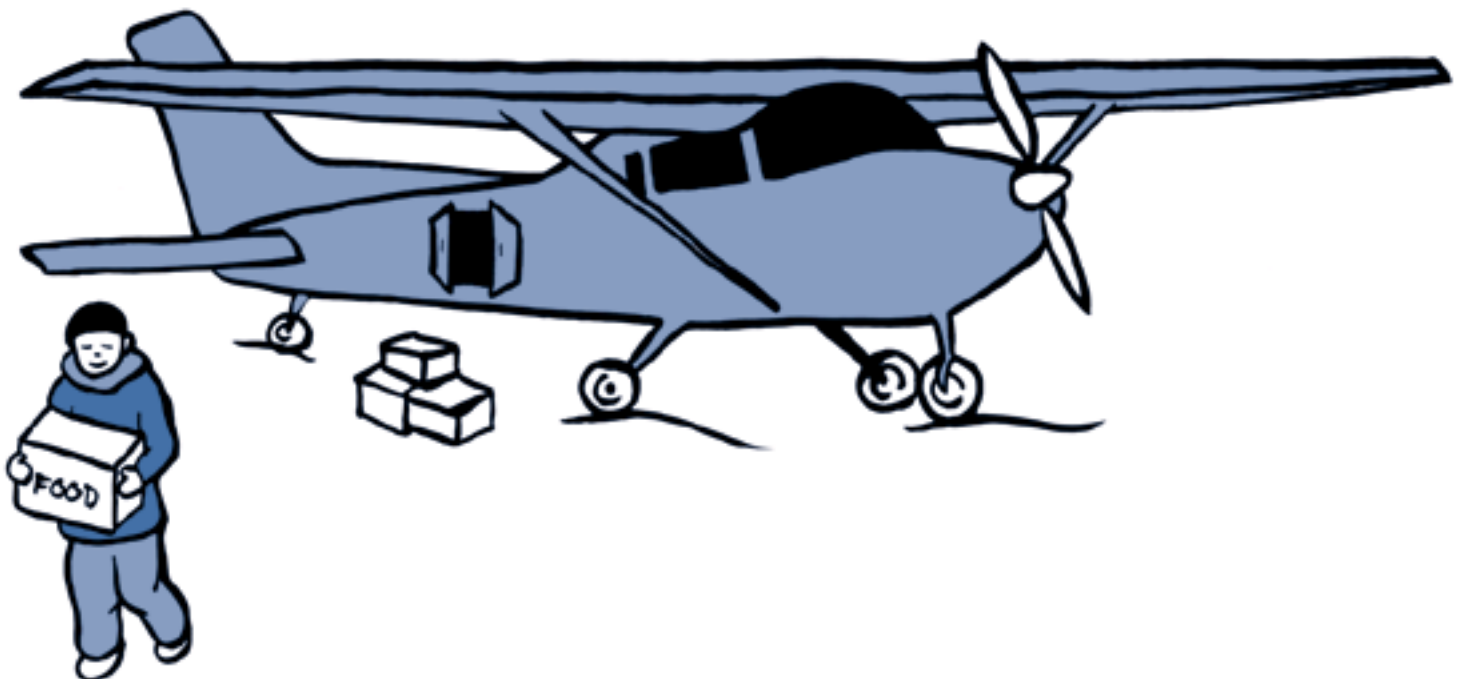
During long dark winters that last more than half the year, neither fruits or vegetables were available to the Inuit. Although some berries were available during summer, in the winter vitamins and minerals came from one source - meats that were eaten either fresh or frozen. Cooking the meats would reduce their vitamin and mineral content.

Many foods, like Arctic char (a fish from the same family as lake trout), were often eaten frozen. Frozen char remains a popular menu item, but people now cook their traditional meats adding imported foods, herbs, sauces and spices. This has not necessarily improved the Inuit diet - it has merely changed it. In some areas, half the people under age 19 and 70 percent of those between 20 and 40 eat some sort of traditional food at least once a day, while all people over 40 eat traditional foods on a daily basis.

Traditional foods still provide the same valuable nutrition, but there is now a limit on how much of it is healthy for people to eat. Wind currents carry many industrial pesticides and pollutants from the south to the Arctic.

Once there, these pollutants get into the food chain and the people who eat the foods from the land. If someone consumes too much food containing these pollutants, they could develop serious health problems. But the answer is not simply to start buying grocery store food. In the southern part of Canada for example, the common diet has resulted in the average person being overweight and at risk to illnesses like heart disease. Most wild meats eaten in the North are lower in cholesterol than commercially raised beef and pork. By eating frozen Arctic char, the Inuit also have a reduced risk of heart problems because of special natural acids found in fresh fish. The health value of Inuit foods cannot be replaced with canned and packaged processed foods, although these items are now a part of the northern diet. The other reason grocery store foods do not provide the final solution to dealing with health and nutrition problems is the cost of foods that have to be flown on cargo planes or shipped North on ships during the summer. Paying close to four dollars for a dozen eggs is not unusual. Neither is paying almost ten dollars for a bag of sugar, or about four dollars for a litre of milk. This is very expensive compared to prices in your area.

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Although many young northerners like macaroni and cheese, hamburgers and crackers, they still place caribou, seal and other wild game at the top of their list of favourite foods. One traditional food that remains popular is muktut - the skin and outer blubber (fat) from a whale. Muktut provides vitamin C, which is priceless in a region where fresh fruits and vegetables are not readily available.

Although many animals are hunted, the greatest overall contributor to the northern diet has always been the seal. Other wild meats, such as the Arctic hare, muskox, bear, walrus, geese and ptarmigan, add variety and other essential vitamins and minerals. The short Arctic summer allows for the harvest of clams and other seafood, as well as the chance for people from some areas to pick Baffin berries (similar to raspberries), blackberries, cranberries and blueberries.

Hunting and harvesting things from the wild also gives young Inuit the same connection to the land that their ancestors had and provides them with exercise, which will allow people of the North to remain healthy.

While the average young Canadian in the southern part of the country sits watching television after school eating cheese and crackers, young northern people may be doing the same thing. But, then again, they could also be snacking on something unique like frozen char or out fishing or hunting with their family.



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This information is also available through the Internet at www.inac.gc.ca

