

# 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 may eat a hamburger and fries, 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 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 lasted more than half the year, neither fruits nor vegetables were available to 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. More traditional/country food is eaten in remote communities than in urban areas. People over 40 years old tend to eat more traditional/country foods than younger people, and men eat more country foods than women.

In the southern part of Canada, the common diet has resulted in more Canadians becoming overweight and at risk for 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, Inuit have a reduced risk of heart problems because of special fatty 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 store foods do not provide the only solution to dealing with health and nutrition problems is the cost of foods—they have to be flown on cargo planes or shipped North on ships during the summer. Normally, you would have to pay \$3.50 for one litre of milk, the same for a dozen eggs, and about \$5.75 for a two-kilogram bag of sugar. 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 muktuk—the skin and outer blubber (fat) from a whale. Muktuk provides vitamin C, which is priceless in a region where fresh fruits and vegetables are not readily available.

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 helps them remain healthy.

While many young Canadians in the southern part of the country sit 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 on the Internet at: [www.ainc-inac.gc.ca](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca)

