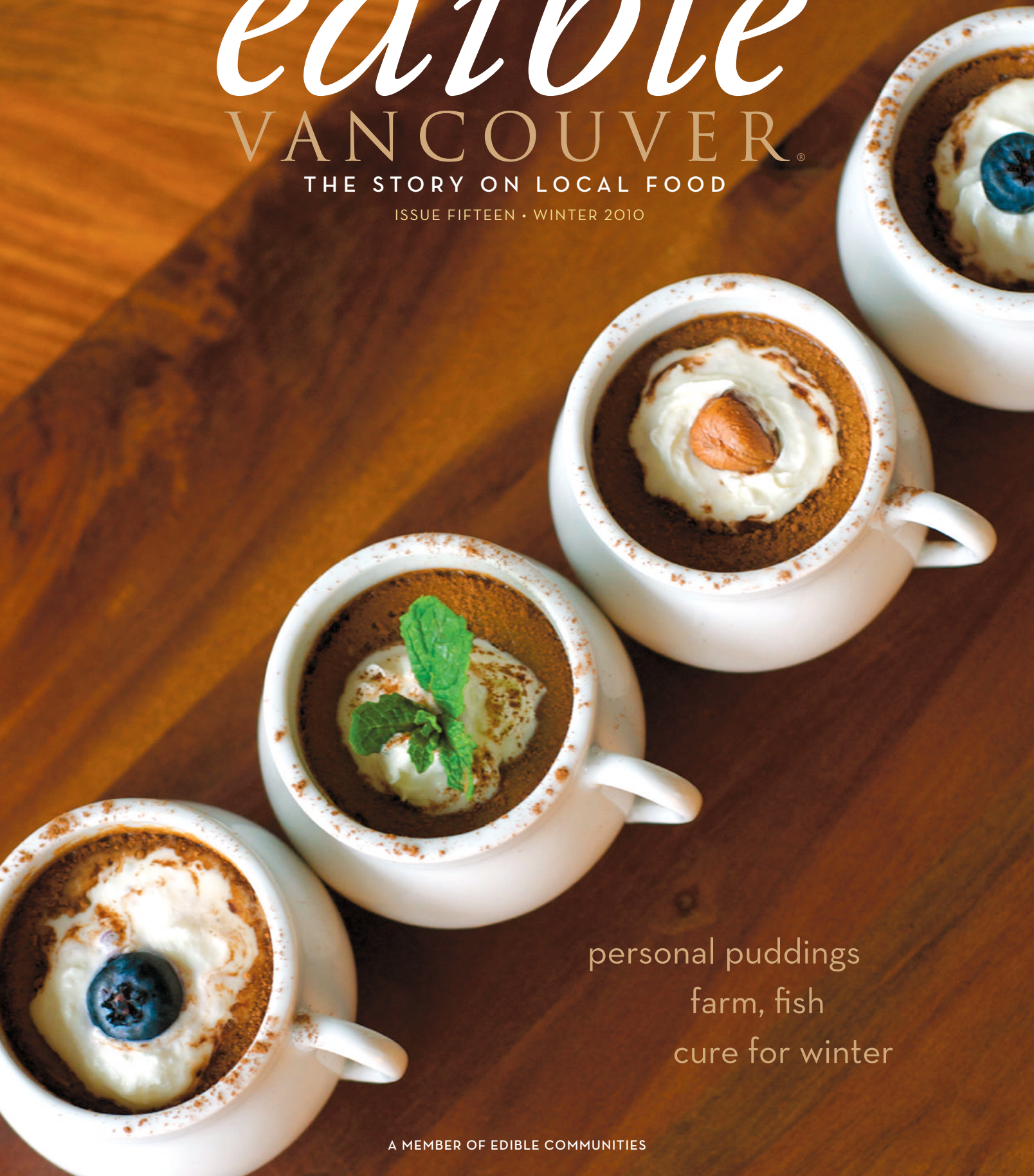


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VANCOUVER[®]

THE STORY ON LOCAL FOOD

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personal puddings
farm, fish
cure for winter



A CURE FOR THE COMMON VANCOUVER WINTER

BY ANNMARIE MACKINNON • PHOTOS BY KEVIN CLARK

Spiced Beverages Take the Chill (and the Edge) Off

Vancouver winters are not known for their bitter cold or colossal amounts of snow. There are few stories of children walking to school in chest-deep snow, or of skin freezing in seconds, as is the case in other parts of the country. But winter, even in a city known for its mild weather, is the time of year when kitchens fill with richer aromas. Hearty root vegetables figure heavily on menus, food is of the comforting variety, and thoughts often turn to sugar plums and gingerbread houses.

Along with these heartier dishes come certain spices that are associated with winter—flavours and smells that emanate from grandmotherly kitchens the world over. Cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, ginger, nutmeg: for many of us, they are some of the most comforting and familiar smells in existence. Even the most *avant garde* chefs turn to these old faithfuls when the weather starts to cool. They are key ingredients in some of our most treasured wintertime recipes, from gingerbread and mince pies, to fruitcakes, puddings, and of course, mulled wine and ale. But most of these spices originate in locales greatly removed from where the dishes are traditionally made.

Those powders and seeds we hold captive in tiny jars in our cupboards were, for centuries, worth their weight in gold. They were often literally used as currency, their countries of origin closely guarded secrets in an effort to maintain the spices' high value, and it was normally only royalty who had access to them. Peppercorns, for example, were counted out one by one, and used to pay for things like tributes or rent to the ruling aristocracy. When Britain founded the East India Company, spices became slightly more widely available in commonwealth homes. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, though no longer found solely in royal kitchens, spices were still quite expensive. As a consequence, they were generally saved for special purposes like preserving foods or feasting.

With feasting comes overindulgence. Many major feasts take place in colder weather, when susceptibility to minor colds and flu is higher, so it makes sense that the spices used in dishes served during the autumn and winter holidays also have well-documented medicinal properties. Ginger, for example, is well known for its anti-nausea properties, can reduce inflammation, and helps with indigestion. Cloves are reported to improve circulation and ward off coughs, and cinnamon is used to improve digestion and help regulate blood sugar. Nutmeg is known to aid digestion, improve circulation and blood pressure, and act as an anti-inflammatory.

And there may be no better delivery system for all the wonderful health benefits of spices than booze. You may have heard the song “Here We Come A-Wassailing,” but if you’re anything like me, at some point you’ve asked the question: What the heck is a wassail, anyway? It’s not definitively clear when the tradition began, but the word wassail comes from the Middle English *waes hael*: a wish that means, basically, be hale, or be well.

It’s much easier to be well on a chilly winter night with a tippie of warm spiced ale, or wassail, as the traditional song describes. To go “a-wassailing” was to go door to door singing carols, normally on January 6th, commonly known as Twelfth Night. But the wassail didn’t always involve the spreading of good cheer and kind wishes between feudal lords and their tenants, as the song would have us believe. It was also an opportunity for roving hooligans to wander the town trick-or-treat style, and unless libations were given, houses were sometimes vandalized.

While it might be considered a bit weird to go singing door to door these days, particularly in the city, wassail’s warming effect is still most welcome on damp Vancouver evenings. Remember though, that despite the many health benefits of the spices, there hasn’t yet been one proven to cure a wassail hangover.

AnnMarie MacKinnon is a Vancouver-based freelance writer. She apologizes to Edible Vancouver’s resident beer-monster, Phil Solman, for adulterating the ale.



WASSAIL From AnnMarie MacKinnon

The ale and spice proportions can be changed depending on taste. I used Phillips Blue Buck Ale and went a little heavier on cloves and ginger than some might because I love their flavours. This recipe is more art than science, and it's fun to experiment and find something that suits your own tastes.

This combination of spices is equally tasty as a supplement to mulled wine—just substitute the port in this recipe with brandy and the apples with some additional citrus peel. For something a little more family-friendly, mull hot apple cider with the same spices.

8 cups (2 litres) ale

½ cup (125mL) port

½ cup (125mL) brown sugar

2 apples, sliced

4 cinnamon sticks

6 cloves

2-inch (5cm) chunk of ginger, sliced

3 cardamom pods

2 star anise

A few strips of orange peel (optional)

Place all ingredients in a slow cooker or in a large pot on a stovetop. Simmer mixture for approximately 2 hours. Strain and serve hot.

WHERE TO BUY SPICES IN VANCOUVER

When buying spices, use your senses: look for plump pods and seeds, and make sure they smell fresh. Touch whole spices and make sure they're not too crumbly—a sign of age. Purchase small quantities, enough for no more than six months, and store in airtight containers.

Galloway's Specialty Foods, 7860 Alderbridge Way, Richmond, and 110-8620 Glenlyon Parkway, Burnaby

Gourmet Warehouse, 1340 East Hastings Street, Vancouver

Maison Coté, at farmers' markets around Vancouver (www.maisoncote.com)

Pepper Pot Food and Spice Company, 105-123 Carrie Cates Court, North Vancouver

South China Seas Trading Company, Granville Island Public Market, and 1502 Victoria Drive, Vancouver