



SHELDON CREEK DAIRY FARM

Sheldon Creek Dairy Farm in Loretto, Ont, produces whole milk, cream and yogurt products that are sold at the farm, in some grocery stores and in restaurants via 100km Foods Inc.

Knowledge of local food taking root

Ontario-grown fare getting boost from technology, research and education

DICK SNYDER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

When Marianne den Haan and her family held their first open house five years ago at their Sheldon Creek Dairy Farm in Loretto, they expected a few local farmers and members of their church to show up. Just to be social and supportive — that’s what farmers do.

“It’s a big thing in the community. If you build a new barn or something, you have a ‘twilight meeting’ and your fellow farmers come to see,” says the 29-year-old third-generation farmer.

But she got more than she bargained for.

“The whole community showed up,” she says. “People told me, ‘We wanted to go and see a farm and have our kids pet a cow.’”

Den Haan is keen to forge a reconnection between consumers and farmers, a connection that has been lost in a rapidly urbanizing society.

“We’re now into the third generation off the farm,” she says. “Parents don’t know where food comes from. But when grandparents come, they remember being on a farm or knowing farmers, and they walk around explaining things to their grandchildren.”

Eric Bowman, who runs Gallery on the Farm northeast of Oshawa, echoes the sentiment: “I have to educate two generations.” He welcomes curious visitors to his farm gate, where

he sells his organic beef and products from other local producers, as well as his paintings.

“Farmers are some of the most conscientious people running a business that you’ll ever get. We’re so busy farming we forget to tell people what we’re doing and why we’re doing it.”

Den Haan and Bowman have seen firsthand how the eat-local movement has grown from fad to frenzy — and not just among millennials. Astute farmers recognize an opportunity when they see it.

“It may be a social trend, but it’s also a desire to go back to a food system that supports itself. So that when they’re eating local food, it’s not just to eat. It’s because it tastes good, it’s seasonal and it comes from a family that’s part of the community.”

Sheldon Creek Dairy’s whole milk, cream and yogurt products are sold at the farm, some grocery stores and are also distributed to restaurants via 100km Foods Inc., a local distributor that works closely with small-scale farms and specialty growers. The company has benefitted from Greenbelt Fund grants that have helped it expand its fleet of trucks in order to better connect farmers with chefs.

“A lot of our customers come by word of mouth,” den Haan says.

“Someone brings a glass bottle of our eggnog to a party and everyone asks where did they get it. ‘Oh, I bought it at St. Lawrence Market and I saw the farmer there last week. They have 55 cows and you can go to the farm and see how everything works.’”

Dan Tukendorf of the Ontario Fruit

and Vegetable Growers Association (OFVGA) says the local food industry has embraced a proven marketing technique. “It’s about putting a face on agriculture. (Food) is not just coming from an imaginary place. There’s actually a human connection.”

And here’s the payoff: “Consumers are asking more questions when they go shopping.”

By some accounts, food literacy among Ontarians gets at least a B grade, if not an A-minus. Nine out of 10 Ontarians recognize that the “Foodland Ontario” logo with the green trillium indicates a locally produced product.

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2015 REPORT: DOLLARS AND SENSE

“Foodland Ontario has a great connection with consumers in store, and has been expanding that logo to other commodities. It used to just be fruits and vegetables, but now encompasses eggs, dairy, cheese, protein and beef,” Tukendorf says.

A program launched two years ago by the Culinary Tourism Alliance in Ontario designates restaurants as FeastON-certified based on the restaurant’s local food and beverage purchases.

“Chefs were the cornerstone of people switching to a local and sustainable food model,” says Arlene Stein, who founded Toronto’s Ter-

roir Food Symposium in 2005. She cites such trailblazers as Jamie Kennedy and Michael Stadlander, but also points to the new guard of highly connected chefs.

“I think (chefs) have the greatest amount of influence publicly, especially with the advent of social media, as well as economically.”

The economics of the agri-food industry are impressive. The restaurant industry alone directly employs 455,400 people, 6 per cent of Ontario’s workforce.

Ontario’s entire food system generates more than \$63 billion in sales and employs 11 per cent of the workforce. Every dollar spent by the farm sector in Southern Ontario generates another \$2.24 circulating through the economy.

Those numbers could grow even larger if Ontario grew and consumed more of its own food.

As of 2012, Ontario imported almost twice as much food as it exported, to the tune of \$19.8 billion. Correcting that deficit would have a direct impact on job creation, according to “Dollars and Sense: Opportunities to Strengthen Ontario’s Food System” (2015).

A mere 10-per-cent reduction in imports of the top 10 imported fruits would employ 1,837 people in full-time equivalent jobs in order to replace these foods with local produce. This would generate \$130 million in GDP.

Technology is another driver for local food. We can get rhubarb in winter, for example, thanks to advances in indoor growing techniques.

“Cucumbers, leaf lettuces and,

more recently, strawberries are being grown all season,” says Tukendorf.

“Better storage techniques and advancements in new varieties help make the product available almost year-round.”

Given Ontario’s capacity for growing even more food to feed its citizens, the challenge lies in getting them to recognize that it’s available — and then to eat it.

A doctoral student at the University of Guelph is studying food skills and literacy in 50 local families. The goal is to determine how parental food skills impact food purchasing, dietary intake and household food waste.

The study involves a variety of departments at the university, as well as the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and the OFVGA. “They all want to learn something different surrounding this topic,” says project lead Angela Wallace.

With technology, research and education all being deployed with the common goal of increasing local food choices, the future should be bright for local food — but the work continues.

“Any customer that is travelling to a farm gate is fully committed,” says Mary Ann Found of Durham’s Found Family Farm.

“My customers like coming because they get to meet us and ask questions.

“Some of them come because they know they are helping their local economy and because they want to see agriculture continue to flourish.”

Serving up food ethics that are easily digestible

Local chefs share resources, set aside competition to help work toward greater good

DICK SNYDER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Chef Guy Rawlings doesn’t look or act much like a food activist.

At his restaurant, Montgomery’s, he sources every ingredient from local farmers and foragers. The rest he makes himself. He knows where each item comes from: who grew it, slaughtered it, found it or made it. But he’s not preachy about it.

“Guy and I have always said that we didn’t want to preach about our val-

ues and shove food ethics down people’s throats,” says manager Kim Montgomery Rawlings.

The Rawlings are part of a growing coterie of young Toronto chef-restaurateurs keen on sustainability. Last week, they participated in Trashed and Wasted, a public tasting of rescued and reclaimed food that brought together chefs, brewers and distillers.

“Ethics aren’t exactly sexy, and that’s not what people really want to think about when they go out to eat. But it isn’t hard for us spread the news about some amazing projects. Despite being a competitive market, I am happy to introduce producers

to other restaurants and chefs who might also be interested in working together.”

This co-operative mentality has really taken off over the past decade or so.

“Pre-2005, even if a chef did have a good local food supply, they wouldn’t share it,” says Arlene Stein, founder of the Terroir Food Symposium, a forum for the industry. “But when the Slow Food movement started to galvanize the city — when we launched Terroir, and when the Greenbelt launched efforts to support local farmers — that’s when chefs became advocates of the local food system. It started because they

were supporting local farmers and creating economic outlets that were broader than their own personal interests.”

Since launching the restaurant last year, Kim Montgomery Rawlings has joined a variety of committees and groups, such as the Toronto Food Policy Council and Sustain Ontario.

“It’s exciting to see so many active players all pushing to make change,” she says. “I feel like we are at a pivotal moment in Canada’s food landscape, and there is great potential for us to shift thinking and practice to make it a much more efficient and fair model.”




DICK SNYDER

Montgomery’s chef Guy Rawlings sources each of his ingredients from local farmers and foragers.

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