

Good Things grow IN ONTARIO

A feast of local food

By Clare Tattersall

The harvest season is well underway in Ontario. Home to nearly 60,000 farms, the province produces more than 200 commodities including sweet corn, squash, tomatoes, nectarines, peaches, apples and pears, all of which are ripe for the picking.

With the recent push by the Province to educate Ontarians about the cornucopia of foods grown regionally, consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of eating local fare — it is fresher, tastes better, provides greater nutritional value and has a lower environmental impact than food shipped long distances. Furthermore, buying and eating locally grown goods supports regional providers, helps build a sustainable society and allows people to reconnect. Perhaps few know this better than the plethora of people who gather annually to take part in Feast of Fields.

Unlike any other food event in Canada, Feast of Fields is a gourmet harvest festival that transports participants and patrons from the hustle and bustle of urban life to a field where food is actually produced. There, attendees are greeted by a bounty of booths manned by farmers, chefs, vintners, brewers, bakers and other local food activists eager to showcase their respective skills and products, ranging from biodynamic wines, organic ales and seasonable produce to freshly shucked oysters, artisan breads, delectable desserts and other bite-size avant-garde delights prepared by a 'who's who' of local chefs, including Jason Bangerter of Auberge du Pommier, Jonathan Gushue of Langdon Hall, John-Paul Adamo of Hockley Valley Resort and Christopher Ennew of St. Anne's Inn and Spa. All food is created to be eaten by hand, eliminating paper plates and other disposable items. In the past, chefs have ingeniously served their fare in lettuce wraps, nestled in vegetable cups, layered on croquettes, mounded on cornbread and even set on cedar planks and pieces of salad.

"Guests truly experience food as never before," says Daniel Gilbert, chair of Organic Advocates, a non-profit organization that supports organic food awareness and sustainability and is responsible for arranging the event.

Beyond the mouthwatering cuisine, Feast of Fields serves as an educational opportunity for all in

attendance. Guests have ample opportunity to speak with the people that actually grow their food and prepare their meals as they leisurely wander through the pastures, grazing the buffet of offerings. Though busy filling attendees' stomachs with food — and brains with knowledge — participants also have time to commingle, exchange ideas and draw inspiration from one another.

"Apart from it being an event for the public it's very much an event for participants, which is what makes it so unique," notes Gilbert who is also the chef-owner of Daniel's of Nobleton Restaurant and Country Inn.

The main fundraising initiative for Organic Advocates, Feast of Fields' original (and still relevant) mandate was to connect chefs with farmers. In doing so, it provides them with direct access to not just locally grown, seasonal foods but organic produce, which at the time of the festival's founding was extremely difficult to source.

"A major thrust of the festival was to supply chefs (with organic food) in a more direct way ... and facilitate market relationships," says chef Jamie Kennedy who along with renowned chef, Michael Stadlander, and other like-minded professionals established the event in 1989.

Evolving from Knives and Forks — the predecessor of Organic Advocates, which Kennedy and Stadlander formed to raise support for utilizing local produce and increase awareness of organic agriculture — Feast of Fields has come a long way since its humble beginnings.

First held at a farm near Rob Roy, Ont., what started off as a small festival has since entered the mainstream and is now attended by more than 1,000 each year. The event has also migrated beyond Ontario's borders and can be found in various locations.

"Like any good event it picked up momentum very quickly," says Kennedy who, while no longer involved in organizing the festival, is a devout supporter of organic agriculture, local producers and traditional methods.

In the mid-1990s, the Feast of Fields concept crossed the country to British Columbia where it was adopted by FarmFolk/CityFolk, a non-profit organization



dedicated to working with 'farm folks' and 'city folks' to cultivate a local, sustainable food system. Today, 'field' events can be found in Whistler, the Okanagan, Lower Mainland and on Vancouver Island.

"It certainly was an event whose time had come," recalls chef-owner David Cohlmeier of Cookstown Greens, one of the first Feast participants who helped identify and organize farmers interested in taking part in the event. "It was every bit as strong back then as it is today."

Now celebrating its 20th anniversary, Feast of Fields is considered 'the' must-attend event of the year for food artisans. But while it has grown in size and scope, with offshoots countrywide, the festival has remained true to its roots.

Each year the event is staged in a rural setting, though the locale varies. Previous Toronto event locations include Cave Spring Cellars in Beamsville, Maple Lawn Farms in Schomberg, Albion Hills Conservation Area and, most recently, Everdale Organic Farm and Environmental Learning Centre in Hillsburgh. This year's Feast will be held at the Kortright Centre for Conservation in Woodbridge. Situated on 800 acres of pristine woodlands, Kortright is Ontario's premier environmental and renewable energy education and demonstration centre.

"Aside from it being a great excuse to get out of the kitchen and meet people, it's a great learning tool for me in the kitchen," says Roberto Fracchioni, executive chef of the historic Millcroft Inn and Spa.

This year marks Fracchioni's 11th in attendance and, as in the past, he will be joined by some of his younger "greener" cooks.

"When they're out there talking to the growers it suddenly dawns on them that tomatoes don't come out of a box — somebody actually plants the seeds, waters, harvests and packs them," he says. "It makes them have an immediate respect for the product."

For Fracchioni, like many other festival goers, the Feast has changed his purchasing behaviour. Approximately four years ago, around the time he arrived at Millcroft, the chef began working with a local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farmer. Every spring before the start of the growing season, Fracchioni buys shares in the farm in return for a weekly pick-up of produce.

"We give (the farm) the money upfront to support (farm) operations throughout the season and then whatever's harvested is divvied up between the shareholders," he explains, adding this socio-economic model of agriculture is inherently riskier.

"You don't know how good the yield is going to be or what you're going to get or," says Fracchioni, noting he's always received a good mix of produce, some of which he plans to use in his Feast offering this year.

To be held Sept. 13, the 2009 event will showcase more than 100 exhibitors, including 40 chefs, 10 microbreweries and 11 wineries. Upon arrival, patrons will receive a carry bag with a 'keepsake' cookbook of recipes as well as a linen napkin and wine glass to be used throughout the afternoon. Tickets are \$100 per person, with a significant portion going to an ecological group or organization to promote sustainable, organic agriculture. Past recipients include the Ecological Farmers Association, the University of Guelph Organic Agriculture Program, York University and Seeds of Diversity.



On the Web

A LOOK AT SOME OF FEAST OF FIELDS' PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENTS, TICKET INFORMATION AND A SNEAK PEEK AT ONE OF THE MANY RECIPES TO BE INCLUDED IN THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY 'KEEPSAKE' COOKBOOK.