

Local food symposium lays out huge opportunities

A number of speakers described how they've been successful offering local food choices

BY LOIS HARRIS
Ontario Farmer

A thick coating of snow blanketed Niagara-on-the-Lake as about 150 food industry insiders gathered in early February at the Local Food Symposium to swap ideas, strategies and business cards.

Organized by the Greenbelt Fund, the two-day symposium's aim was to increase local food production and sales in Ontario.

The Greenbelt Fund grew out of the Greenbelt Foundation, which was started shortly after Ontario passed legislation in 2005 that protects 1.8 million acres to "help keep farmers successful, strengthen local economies, and protect and grow natural features."

Grants provided by the government through the foundation had to be used in the Greenbelt—an area surrounding the Golden Horseshoe—and for charities or non-profit organizations. The fund, started in 2010, is also able to help for-profit businesses right across the province.

Between June 2010 and March 2014, it invested \$7.9 million in local food-boosting projects. The organization says that for every \$1 it invests, local food sales increase by \$7.

Day one of the symposium was a series of concurrent bus tours to various farms, food hubs and research facilities in the Toronto and Niagara areas. Among the topics covered on day two was how big corporations are working to get local food into the marketplace.

Arran Stephens, CEO of Nature's Path Foods, gave a presentation that was as unique as his organic foods company. Beginning in the late 1960s, Stephens has built his Richmond, B.C.-based company into North America's largest independent organic cereal producer.

His family-owned firm's motto is "always leave the earth better than you found it," a philosophy that has paid off over the years and on the thousands of acres he owns and contracts from organic farmer suppliers above and below the border.



Nature's Path Foods CEO Arran Stephens addresses a question as Bill Baptie of GFS listens.

(PHOTO BY LAURA BERMAN)

A presentation by Gordon Food Services (GFS), a large U.S.-based distributor, showed how the company has integrated local Ontario food into its offerings to the province's restaurants, universities, health care facilities and more.

In 2014, GFS listed more than 500 Ontario products from 40 growers and producers worth \$28 million—a 15 per cent increase over the year before.

In the old days, the company didn't even keep track of the point of origin of their products.

"Customers started asking where their product comes from, and if customers wanted to know, we needed to know," Bill Baptie, director of marketing and procurement said.

"We are accidental champions—we've found we have a role in the broader evolution, that we're not just conduit—we're leading and driving change."

Over the past five years, with help from the Greenbelt Fund, GFS has completed several projects to get more local food onto local plates. They've put a green leaf on customer order forms to indicate local product availability.

They've sponsored seminars for vendors and suppliers to learn more about how the system works. They are even helping set up three regional food hubs in London, Milton and Ottawa this year from which local farmers can get their products distributed more widely.

Baptie pointed out that right now, with the low Canadian dollar, it is the perfect opportunity to promote and sell food locally.

IN ONE of the eight breakout sessions, entitled "Breaking the Silos," an overflow crowd lis-

tened as representatives from the farm, foodservice and restaurant sectors talked about how they made local food an important part of their businesses.

"We have been rebuilding our broader public sector business after 10 years of being out of it," said Cory Van Groningen, a beef farmer and owner, with his three brothers, of VG Meats.

The company lost a request-for-proposal (RFP) bid in 2011 for supplying MEALSource, a firm that handles food contracts for 34 healthcare foodservice operations in Ontario.

One of the things VG Meats identified was that, while they were close to the prices of the other bidders, they would have had to pump a lot of water into the product to succeed. When the company asked MEALSource if that's what they wanted, they said no.

Eventually, VG Meats won a subsequent contract and because of its input, the RFP process was altered—now it's based on a price per gram of protein rather than a price per serving.

This kind of thinking and strategy has driven the expansion of VG Meats from a small beef farm and meatpacking business started by the Van Groningen's granddad in Norfolk in the 1970s to a company that recently expanded from 18 to 60 employees.

Others on this panel included Joshna Maharaj, assistant director of food services and executive chef at Ryerson University, Richard Willett, vice-president, food and beverage at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre (MTCC), and Eric Wood, executive chef at the PORT restaurant in Pickering and the Maple Leaf Tavern in east Toronto.

All three buy food in bulk to



Beef farmer/entrepreneur Cory Van Groningen and U.S. farmer/author Joe Salatin share experiences during the Local Food Symposium. (PHOTO BY LAURA BERMAN)

feed their customers and clients. All three are dedicated to put as much local food on the menu as possible.

Obtaining the large volumes of product needed in foodservice can be challenging. But Willett, whose organization serves 750,000 meals annually, said that having that kind of buying power is very helpful when it comes to getting what he wants from distributors.

MTCC implemented its local food procurement policy in August, 2011.

Maharaj, who stepped into her job after the poor food quality at Ryerson made the news, said the most important strategy in the move to local is to nurture the staff who make purchasing decisions.

"We take staff on farm visits," she said. "The good food light bulbs go off, and the connections bring things to life."

Willett pointed out that clients are driving the move to local. He recounted a story about how Microsoft sent auditors into the convention centre before the company would agree to hold their conference there, to make sure their local food claims were not "greenwashing".

Wood, a renowned Canadian chef and long-time local food champion, said, "the food tastes better, is better, and is better for you."

In his restaurants, Wood said he has the flexibility to offer customers what farmers are selling. He said he can buy 25 pounds of root vegetables and just say "seasonal vegetables" on the menu, instead of being specific about individual products.

THE AFTERNOON keynote speaker was Joel Salatin, a published author and self-described libertarian who farms in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley and

supplies dozens of local markets with grass-fed beef, pork, pasture-raised chickens and eggs.

"I want small farmers to not have to work in towns for the man," he said. "Why should a person with a vocation as sacred as farming need a second, off-farm income in order to do it?"

Using his lengthy experience and unorthodox approach to farming, Salatin recommended a few strategies to help overcome traditional problems associated with getting local food into the marketplace.

They included:

- Collaboration. While he believes farmers markets and community-shared agriculture are inefficient systems, he likes food clusters in which a group of complementary producers get together under one distribution umbrella. They can save costs by having, for example, one accountant and one marketer for several farms.

- Electronic aggregation, or on-line purchasing. Salatin said 45 per cent of his sales come from on-line shopping carts. His company doesn't distribute farther than four hours from the farm, and brings in more than \$2 million in sales.

He says his goal is to make the supermarket obsolete through electronic housing—or keeping the inventory on the farm until it is shipped to the customer. He says this is a better system in several ways, including being safer, more transparent and accountable.

- Empirical food safety. His theory is that food safety testing should be left to the farmers and food processors. He suggested that samples could be sent to government laboratories, but feels that current government regulations are strangling the industry.