

Farm to fork was "fabulous"

BY ISABEL MOSSELER
TRIBUNE

Who knew local food could taste this good? That was the buzz on Friday evening, November 14th, as around 40 guests crowded into the Pasta Kitchen & Bar for the first ever Farm to Fork event, celebrating local West Nipissing / Warren food producers. The event, hosted by the West Nipissing Chamber of Commerce, featured a dinner prepared by local chef Chris Gibb, with a spectacular menu consisting entirely of locally grown food.

"We went to great lengths to assure that everything was local. Only three things we used weren't local: salt, baking soda and gelatin," Gibb reveals.

The meal was a smash hit with attendees, who were also fund raising for the West Nipissing Food Bank at \$80 a plate. The 4-course meal consisted of a garden salad with lettuce mix, romanesco cauliflower and a warm tomato vinaigrette (sourced from Field Good Farms in Cache Bay); caramelized carrot soup (with ingredients from Leisure Farms in Sturgeon Falls); hay smoked grass-fed rib-eye and striploin beef (from Dalew Farms in Lavigne); roast potato, leek, kale, marrow sauce (Field Good Farms); butternut squash and maple sorbet (Leisure Farms, Succerie Seguin Sugarbush) with pumpkin seed praline, and raspberry.

Jolene Lisk, the Chamber's Project Manager, and Isabelle Spence-Legault of Field Good Farms, explained the purpose of the event. "The Chamber has been working on the West Nipissing Business Growth initiative for the last year, and in that time has formed the West Nipissing Agricultural Task Force Committee. This committee is the driving force behind this event... (and) has been formed to encourage people to eat local."

Lisk continued, "We are working on organizing events such as this to provide firsthand experience on what local food producers have to offer and to encourage businesses to sell local agricultural products. We want to promote shopping local here in West Nipissing. The Chamber is developing a long term marketing campaign that will brand the West Nipissing business community and promote its goods and services. We want to create a West Nipissing stamp that is recognizable. We're proud of the products made here in West Nipissing and we want people to know where these products are coming from."

Julie Poirier Mensinga, of the Verner OMAFRA (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs) office, provided recipe booklets to help guests turn local foods into great meals. "Foodland Ontario is a branding program with the OMAFRA to promote fresh vegetables, fruit, meat, and dairy that are grown here in Ontario. If you are looking for more recipe ideas for the wonderful food which is being grown by your local farmers, I would encourage you to have a look at the Foodland Ontario website," she invited.

Ryan Spence, co-owner of Field Good Farms, acted as the keynote speaker following the dinner. "Our farm provided a lot of the vegetables you would have eaten. Our farm is a mixed vegetable farm in Cache Bay. We have some poultry, as many as we are allowed. For vegetables, the main thing we do is the CSA program with about 100 members. CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture. Some of you are members of our

program. Basically you invest in the farm at the beginning and you get a share of the farm produce, and for 18 weeks we deliver a box of fresh vegetables to you."

Spence and wife Isabelle Spence-Legault are also very active in the 'eat local' movement. "We sell at Eat Local Sudbury. We sell at the North Bay Farmer's Market, and we sell to local restaurants like this one right here. We're a pretty new farm in the region. Isabelle and I both went to university and we like our degrees, but what we really bonded over was food. The more we researched food politics, how food is made, (...) we went crazy enough to do an internship with Dalew Farms, which is where the beef came from tonight. They are in Lavigne."

The two enjoyed that internship so much, they decided to make a life of it. "We thought maybe to come back here because Isabelle's family has a farm. So they leased us ten acres. Part of moving back for us was that we wanted to be active in changing the food system a little bit... It meant focusing on three things. One was to focus on healthy food for people. Although this food tonight tastes great, it's also healthy food. It is also healthy farming for the environment. We try to be very respectful to our environment."

"The next thing is community. We believe great food brings people together. That's always been important for us and part of our CSA is (...) it allows us to know our clients. If they have questions about how we are farming we can tell them, and if they want a recipe idea; and then we find our clients sharing ideas together. It creates a nice community," Spence added.

"And the final thing (...) is prosperity for the community, us wanting to participate in a more local economy. It means supporting other local businesses, and that's what is happening here tonight. I read ... a study by the American Independent Business Alliance regarding chain restaurants versus independently owned restaurants in the local community, and chain restaurants will recirculate about 34.5% of their gross revenue (in the community) whereas an independent restaurant will be closer to 65% - almost double the money goes back into the community. Events like this are the fruition of all these things coming together and so we're thankful that you all showed up," he closed.

Mitch DesChatelets of Leisure Farms spoke of his operation: "Leisure Farms is a family operated farm. My parents bought the farm in 1981 from my grandparents, and it's now one of the largest pick-your-owns in Ontario for raspberries and strawberries. We grow fruits and a variety of vegetables. We supply some of the local restaurants and grocery stores in Sudbury and North Bay and we also attend the farmers' market in North Bay every Saturday and Wednesday, and we also strongly believe in local economy. For example, some of the restaurants, chip stands and other businesses in and around town tell me they know which day we're busy because they are busy also. It works at both ends. Thank you very much for supporting us."

Greg Melein of Boreal Berry Farm and Winery (based on Little Brulé Road in Warren), and his wife Mira, manage the first winery in this area, opening an entire new industry in the North. Melein's in-laws drove from Sarnia to be part of the evening. "What a won-

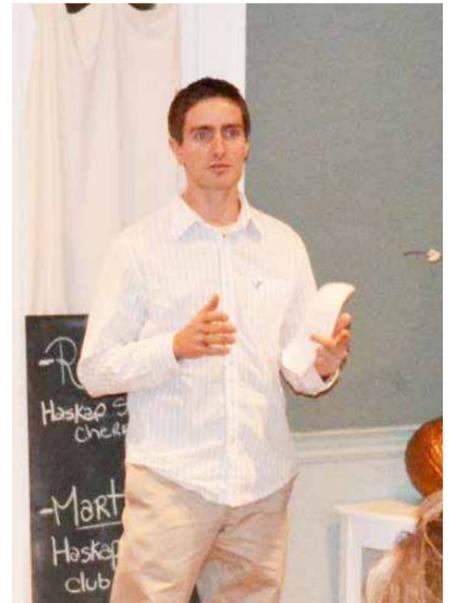
derful event to have tonight - local food! You can't get better food than this!" Melein raved. "You're getting your food in grocery stores and you get that onto your plate, you have no idea how long that's been in transit and losing all the vital nutrients that you can only get if you were to grow it in your own garden. To have local people like this growing food like this is fantastic! You can taste the difference in the food."

He also introduced the little-known Boreal Berry Farm & Winery. "Right now we're putting out anywhere from 500 to 600 cases a year. But we are set for about 10,000 up to 20,000, which would be our maximum, if we can get to that point. There are a couple of things of course; we couldn't sell our wine here tonight, and it really is a wonderful wine. (...) There is a whole bunch of stuff, rules and regulations in Ontario, that don't allow us to sell the wine here tonight. But we are local, and we've had great success this year, right from North Bay to Sudbury. We've had lots of support from the local community and we hope we can continue this and keep making fantastic wines. They are all very unique wines."

According to organizers, this was just the first of several events to promote the Eat Local / Shop Local initiative. Chef Gibb was certainly pleased. "It went extremely well. Our intent was to get 100% as local as possible, and we succeeded. (...) I spoke to Ryan, Isabelle and Mitch after and they are going to get a bigger

event going."

Indeed, Chris Gibb has made a practice of supporting local producers as much as possible. This first event was just the hors-d'oeuvre for a future of regional cooking that will hopefully put West Nipissing on the culinary map of tasty local food.



Ryan Spence, co-owner of Field Good Farms in Cache Bay, addresses the audience at the first West Nipissing Farm to Fork dinner held at the Pasta Kitchen and Bar last Friday, explaining the advantages of eating local both in terms of health to the individual and to the health of the local economy.

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