

THE MENU IS THE MESSAGE

BY TIM SHUFF

FEAST OF FIELDS CONNECTS THE LINKS IN THE LOCAL FOOD CHAIN IN AN ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF FUN AND FLAVOUR



Chef Daniel Gilbert sets up at the Feast of Fields. ABOVE: The harvest is underway at Everdale Farm.

A STUDY BY FOODSHARE IN TORONTO FOUND THAT A BASKET OF PRODUCE FROM AN ONTARIO GROCERY STORE TRAVELLED AN AVERAGE OF 5,365 KILOMETRES – 81 TIMES FURTHER THAN THE SAME PRODUCTS FROM A NEARBY FARMERS' MARKET

One spring day at Everdale, farm manager Gavin Dandy explains how the gourmet feast will begin. From the parking lot, you'll set out by foot or wagon toward the feast site at the back of the property. The wagon will be drawn by horses or a tractor running on biodiesel, made at Everdale from used vegetable oil from local restaurants.

Along the way, tour guides will interpret Everdale's highlights: the straw bale buildings, the education centre, the solar and wind-power installations, the heritage and rare seed garden, the demonstration plots of organic herbs, flowers, carrots, pumpkins and beans – and explain everything in the context of local food systems.

At the feast site, you will find tents set up in a pasture surrounded by a mixed hardwood forest at the very upper limit of the headwaters of the Credit River.

"If you're standing where the chefs' tents are going to be and you pick up a rock and throw it north, then that rock would land on the Grand River watershed," says Dandy. Which places this patch of grass squarely inside the margins of the official Greenbelt. That's fitting, because The Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation is the Feast of Fields' main sponsor this year.

One of the Greenbelt's objectives is to preserve agriculture close to southern Ontario's urban centres by creating a culture of local eating – in which people see the value of sometimes paying a premium (however ironic that may seem) for produce that hasn't been transported from hundreds, or thousands, of miles away.

Activists talk about "food-miles." The eating odyssey documented by Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon in *The 100-Mile Diet* was spurred by the unpalatable fact that the average grocery store item travels at least 2,400 kilometres from farmer to table. A study by Foodshare in Toronto found that a basket of produce from an Ontario grocery store travelled an average of 5,365 kilometres – 81 times further than the same products from a nearby farmers' market.

In that ethical minefield we call the produce section, it's not good enough just to buy organic anymore. In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, journalist Michael Pollan cites the fact that 80 calories-worth of organic pre-washed lettuce, transported across the continent from California, consumes about

LOCAL FOOD RESOURCES

Wellington County Buy Local! Buy Fresh! Map
Buy Local! Buy Fresh! maps highlight farms, markets, CSAs, stores and restaurants that sell local food. The Wellington County Buy Local! Buy Fresh! Map is available at local food hotspots including Everdale Farm and What's Cookin' in Erin.

Peel Buy Local! Buy Fresh! Map
www.GrownInPeel.ca

Buy Local! Buy Fresh! Event
On June 23, Everdale will host a Buy Local! Buy Fresh! day with guided tours, guest speakers, food and music from 10 am to 4 pm (www.everdale.org).

Community Shared Agriculture (CSAs)
Everdale Farm (www.everdale.org)
Whole Village (www.wholevillage.org)
Bernway Farm (519-833-9910)
Saugeen River CSA
(519-369-3567 – Caledon shares available)

Farmers' Markets
www.farmersmarketsontario.com

Farm Internships
CRAFT is a network of more than a dozen southern Ontario organic farms, including Everdale, that offer educational internships to people who want to learn to be organic farmers (www.craftontario.ca).

4,600 calories of fossil fuel. About 85 per cent of the organic food in Ontario stores is imported. In the U.S. (probably Canada too) one-fifth of petroleum goes to producing and transporting food.

It's calculations like those that have people in the food movement saying "local is the new organic." All the more so as industrial food processors bully into the organic field, cashing in on consumer interest in organics with mass-produced foods that have questionable credentials in a poorly regulated market.

However, there is hope that we can reduce our ecological footprint – eat our way back to the garden, so to speak, if we can bring the garden closer to home.

In the spirit of this resurgence of "food localism," the organizers of Feast of Fields have decided to move beyond organics to push fresh, local food. They have made this year's theme "sustainable living starts with your local organic farmer," which is where Everdale's agriculture connections really come into play.

Your local organic farmer is the next stop on the Feast of Fields journey. At the site's farmers' market, you'll meet local growers who, in addition to selling you produce to take home, can tell you



Tasty treats at the Feast.

everything about the triumphs and trials of small-scale organic farming in southern Ontario.

Here you may meet Cathy Hansen, a farmer who runs a local market garden in Ospringe, called Bernway Farm. Hansen is also a chef and former kitchen manager of the Erin food emporium, What's Cookin', which will also be participating at Feast of Fields. Like Everdale Farm, Caledon's Whole Village, and many other growers who will be represented here, Hansen sells most of her produce through a CSA – Community Shared Agriculture – which lets consumers pre-purchase a share of a farm's produce for a whole season.

FARMERS LIKE CATHY HANSEN ARE PIECING TOGETHER THE LINKS OF A BROKEN LOCAL FOOD CHAIN THAT'S BEEN LOST TO INDUSTRIAL LOGIC LIKE THE WINDING BLUE HIGHWAYS OVERRUN BY THE INTERSTATES

Hansen's CSA feeds twenty families from her one-acre garden. The families pick up a weekly box of in-season produce at a church in Guelph. There, she also runs workshops to on how to eat what's in the box: what to eat first; creative ways to cook with Ontario staples, such as beets; and how to use up end-of-the-week leftovers. She's teaching the lost art of seasonal eating: what to eat when and how.

Farmers like Cathy Hansen are piecing together the links of a broken local food chain that's been lost to industrial logic like the winding blue highways overrun by the interstates. You might not get your food as quickly and cheaply going the local route, but the journey is more interesting.

At Feast of Fields, Hansen says, "I would like to see people come away with a new appreciation of what's right in their backyard. This is food that is grown in the right place for the right reasons. It has the potential to revitalize our rural communities."

Farm manager Gavin Dandy in Everdale's organic fields.



Now put aside the moral lessons for a while and enjoy the flavour of fresh seasonal food. You approach the chefs' tents and begin sampling. Here is Paul Weekes from What's Cookin', serving up something from an Erin farm. Nadya Swrydenko of Juniper Grill in Orangeville presents a dish prepared by her husband, Daniel Jalovec, that includes heirloom tomatoes from her mother's Caledon garden. And Roberto Fracchioni, chef at the Millcroft Inn & Spa, delivers a little organic haute cuisine of the sort that has won that restaurant a host of culinary awards.

Fracchioni, at the Feast for the seventh year in a row, believes strongly in local eating. This year for the first time, he has purchased ten shares from the CSA at Whole Village – one-sixth of the farm's produce – to supply the Millcroft's kitchen with fresh, organic vegetables from less than five kilometres away. Parts of the Millcroft menu are deliberately vague – "daily foraged vegetables" – to incorporate the fresh delivery.

"To me it's logical to cook local food that's prepared seasonally and is grown by people who care," says Fracchioni. "We have a natural food cycle where melons are ready in the fall, peaches are ready in the summer, and if you follow that, you're happy because there's always something new around the corner."

Fracchioni savours the Feast of Fields as an occasion to connect with new local suppliers. "One person brought tomatoes one year. He probably had forty different kinds. It really blows your mind. You think, 'What the hell am I doing using Romas?'"

By the time you begin to gorge yourself on the food samples, you will have effectively travelled the entire food chain from field to table, which is exactly the point.

Michael Pollan calls our industrial food system a "journey of forgetting" because it obscures all the connections between producers and consumers. The Feast of Fields is a journey of remembering. It is the food system writ small, at human scale, the way food localists believe it ought to be. You eat the food outside, under the sky in the place where it was grown. You meet the people who prepared the food, and the people who grew it. You tap into a network of backyard gardens, farmers' markets, CSAs, roadside stands and restaurants that will be your resources for eating locally the rest of the year.

Most important, you come away feeling good about what you ate and where it came from. ≈

Feast of Fields takes place Sunday, September 16 at Everdale Farm. For information, visit www.feastoffields.org.

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