
MARVELOUS MORSELS OF FOOD AND THOUGHT

NURTURING THE ART OF SUSTAINABLE LIVING

BY JUDITH FINLAYSON



Terroir, the idea taken from viticulture that the sum of the parts of a place determines the unique taste and character of its products, provided

the framework recently for a celebration of local food and wine, and a wide-ranging discussion on the sustainability of our food supply. On September 25, at Toronto's Isabel Bader Theatre, the Gardiner Museum launched "From the Ground Up," its first annual event on nurturing the art of sustainable living. Moderated by journalist and activist Lori Stahlbrand, president of Local Food Plus, the lecture component featured talks by the pioneers of Canada's slow food movement – local chefs Jamie Kennedy and Michael Stadtländer, along with innkeeper Sinclair Philip of Vancouver Island's legendary Sooke Harbour House.

Over the past few years, concerns about the safety and sustainability of our food supply have moved to the forefront of public consciousness thanks to a spate of books and news stories covering a diverse range of issues, from global warming to the debilitating effects of monoculture and factory farms. Each speaker presented a unique perspective, but all were consistent in their message: the vital role that locally produced food plays in creating a safe and sustainable food culture. As chefs, they are passionately aware that locally sourced seasonal ingredients provide the basis for quality, as well. At Sooke Harbour House, Philip and his staff base their cuisine on the exceptional flavours of regional foods – wild and foraged, as well as those that are grown, caught or raised in the area. Kennedy returned repeatedly to the notion that excellence depends upon the land and the community living on that land or, as he phrased it, "gastroonomy begins in community."

Jamie Kennedy set the stage by providing an historical perspective. In the past, when people came together to form villages, they ate what they had hunted and gathered or produced. Cooking skills developed and were handed down from generation to generation. Gradually, traditions evolved based not only on the people who did the cooking and the dishes they prepared, but also on seasonality and the growers and producers. These traditions were fiercely defended because communities had worked together to create a food culture uniquely rooted in place, something we would now describe as regional cooking.

At its most basic, regional cooking is a celebration of differentiation, and it's a far cry from the culinary world that Kennedy entered into as a novice chef in the mid-1970s. In those days, chefs relied heavily on gargantuan models of food distribution that extended into every corner of the planet, and he vividly remembers his excitement when he realized he could source practically anything from anywhere in the world. Understanding more profound connections was a learning process that took place over time.

Michael Stadtländer, who lives and works on his 100-acre Eigensinn Farm just south of Georgian Bay in rural Ontario, presented a workplace in direct antithesis to the industrial model he and Kennedy encountered as budding chefs. He shared intimate stories of his workdays cooking dinner at his intimate farm restaurant, using foods he has himself raised or produced, or foraged from the countryside surrounding him. Concerns about provenance are virtually nonexistent because he either grows his food at Eigensinn or purchases it from neighbouring farmers. The harmony between work, life and nature was palpable in his remarks.

So, too, with Sinclair Philip, who has owned Sooke Harbour House with his wife, Frederique, since 1979. The inn has always sourced ingredients locally, not simply because it cuts down on food miles, but also because it provides the most flavourful foods while helping to rebuild local food communities. Five hundred edible plant species are grown in their garden, providing much of the produce for the superb dishes served at the inn. The Philips are proud of the role they have played in the revival and development of market gardening in the Vic-

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toria area and they are committed environmentalists, making compost and reclaiming over two million litres of water every year, which is treated to near drinking-water quality. Among other uses, the recycled water is used to irrigate the gardens.

Though the inn is inspiring as a model of sustainability, Philip feels the idyll is threatened by a miasma of external forces such as global warming. He produced alarming statistics suggesting that at present rates of carbon dioxide production, ocean water will have become so acidic by the year 2050 that shells would be unable to form. In other words, shellfish may well become extinct in about forty years. Some of his revelations about the production of greenhouse gases were particularly fascinating. Who knew, for instance, that unsustainable food production contributes more to global warming than do automobiles?

Philip shares Kennedy's passion for the need to develop regional culinary traditions. When Kennedy began working with Stadtländer, the young chefs quickly realized that locally produced ingredients tasted better than imports. But this was merely the departure point for a long journey, which among other things caused them to extend their networks more deeply into the community. In 1989 they started Knives and Forks, an association that brought together organic farmers and urban chefs, thus beginning the process of building partnerships with rural producers in a more serious way. Not surprisingly, this progression was creatively inspiring, and not only because there was a causal relationship between doing the right thing and producing the most delicious food. Kennedy began to see that the interaction between producers and chefs established the basis for identifying regional traditions in cooking. Over the years he has expanded this network of artisan growers and producers and has been gratified to see that more and more chefs in Ontario are working this way. With the passage of time this dynamic relationship with the environment will spawn and shape a recognizable regional cuisine, one that is uniquely linked with the sense of place.

Jamie Kennedy Kitchens at the Gardiner certainly went the distance toward defining the essence of Ontario cuisine at a sumptuous four-course dinner that followed the lecture. From the vineyards of Niagara to the waters of Georgian Bay, prod-

ucts and produce arrived at the museum's kitchen to be transformed into a remarkable meal that highlighted the pleasures of eating well in this part of the world.

Guests were treated to a selection of hors d'oeuvres that celebrated our edible landscape: smoked whitefish canapés, Niagara prosciutto on sour cabbage grissini, and buttery black walnut shortbread, accompanied by a 2002 Vineland St. Urban Riesling. Growers, fishers and producers, including Mark Trealout and Laura Boyd of Kawartha Ecological Growers, Andrew and Natasha Akiwenzie of Akiwenzie's Fish & More, Ruth Klahsen of Monforte Dairy, Mario and Barbara Pingue of Niagara Food Specialties, and Lisa and Greg Pietras of Avalon Farms, joined other guests *à table* to enjoy a mouthwatering progression of courses, ranging from a luscious pumpkin soup garnished with toasted seeds and presented in perfect tiny pumpkins, to a seductive pear and chocolate cake with iced sheep's milk yogurt. Exceptional Georgian Bay lake trout poached in locally produced soya oil and served with a smooth, satiny soubise, and Avalon Farms Rouen duck with cider-poached apples completed the meal. Paul DeCampo of Henry of Pelham (and convivium leader of Slow Food Toronto) selected the artfully paired wines, from the 2003 Peninsula Ridge Reserve Chardonnay that set off the soup, to the 2006 Fielding Estate Cabernet Franc Select Late Harvest that beautifully balanced the complex flavours in the irresistible dessert.

“It is very difficult to achieve excellence in gastronomy outside the local context,” said Kennedy, whose dinner reminded me of listening to a perfectly executed symphony and responding to the exciting variations on familiar themes. He also remarked that “it takes a village to make a meal.” But what a meal that village of producers, fishers, growers, artisans and chefs made – in my books, a uniquely memorable contribution to the culture of Ontario food. □

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