
INTRODUCTION

OUR EDIBLE WONDERLAND YOURS TO DISCOVER

BY ANITA STEWART

My fingertips were stained a rich, dark vermillion. I was standing in an orchard in Vineland, in the middle of a “library” of cherry trees – with my mouth full. It was my personal version of culinary heaven. The sun was beating down; the land was radiating with the heat that equals summer in Niagara. Dragonflies danced. Periodically a loud “bang” punctuated the silence, fending off the competition – flocks of hungry birds. And there was fruit!

The Vineland Research Station of the University of Guelph holds hundreds of varieties of tender fruit trees. Each ripens at its own pace: some grow better during hot dry summers, others don't. With both hands covered with sugary sweetness, I was privileged to taste the future of our province – one juicy cherry at a time. Later on I would come back for peaches, which because of the dedication of the research community, will be on the trees till late September – and late peach varieties are my absolute favourites!

Without question, it is research stations such as Vineland and Simcoe, both in the Niagara region, Harrow in the southwest, and New Liskeard in the north, that foretell the future of our provincial larder. Our scientific community, and the farmers who reap the benefits, can hold their own with any on earth. They feed us well. Be it with Yukon Gold potatoes or the best malting barley ever bred or aqua-cultured Arctic char, they have put Ontario and Canada onto the map of the world. And they're still doing it.

What IS Ontario food? The answer is one of huge culinary wealth. From the massive growing region north of Toronto with some three million acres of arable land and great honey, cheeses, certified organic beef, whitefish and wild foods crafted by artisans – not to mention spectacular paddling – to southern Ontario, where we have farms producing nuts (hazel and heart nuts, hickory, northern pecan and even a few trees of pine nuts) and cloth-shaded fields of ginseng, along with at least one huge forest containing tens of thousands of shiitake-laden oak logs, defining the food of Ontario is simply to define the word “possibilities.” We're limited only by our imagination. We are a creative people – we dream big here in Canada's heartland. We dream generously!

Ontario food is perfect lamb, smoked Lake Erie trout, fresh pickerel and tiny yellow perch, awesome peanuts, historic crops and brand new ones. There are quail, pheasant, squab, guinea hen and all the other “traditional” farm animals. We have grass-fed beef and Berkshire pork. Seventeen varieties of squash grow on one single farm, twelve varieties of melon on another, while on still another there are sixteen types of sweet potatoes being trialed.

We grow thirty-one million tulips and some thirty million flashy gerbera. We set our tables with fourteen million multi-coloured sweetheart roses and – my favourite – ten million gracious, fragrant lilies.

Thousands of acres of soybeans and corn flourish. We have cultivated fiddleheads and fat, white Witloof endives, globe artichokes, amazing garlic, shallots and sturdy Millennium asparagus. There are magnificent wines, great craft beers, white peaches, ancient apples, golden raspberries, red, black and white currants...and we haven't even begun to talk about grain production and milling.

When M.F.K. Fisher wrote, “There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine is drunk,” she could have been talking about today's local food scene. From the grassroots level up, Ontarians are nurturing growing circles that feed their own communities and the lucky culinary adventurers who visit.

From eggs to icewine, Ontario is an edible wonderland, a palate of flavours that, as readers of Edible Toronto, you will be encouraged, even challenged, to discover. Edible Toronto helps to empower its readers by giving environmentally conscious Ontarians a real and obvious choice to shrink their collective footprint while dining on some of the most delicious food on the planet. Edible Toronto is more than a magazine – it's a statement. It is urban-rural bridge building of the finest order – through food, bringing the delicious ingredients of the countryside to our extraordinary cities and towns...

You will be shown new foods and even told the stories of some old ones. You will be dared to eat seasonally. You will be introduced to some very real characters and some marvelous culinary destinations.

This is our province! Dive into it with a healthy appetite. Explore it. Pick it fresh. Savour it. This is our land... strong, proud and absolutely delicious. □

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