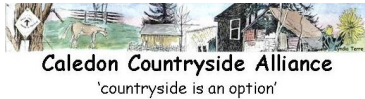


Proceedings From

Building the Infrastructure for Local Food in Ontario:

Creating Public/Private Partnerships

Held Thursday April 30-Friday May 1, 2009
Memorial Hall, North York Civic Centre, Toronto



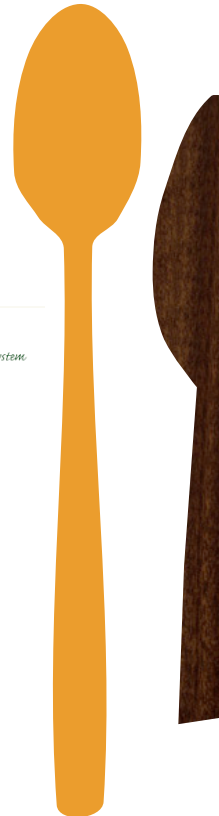
greater toronto area
agricultural action committee

Enhancing and Energizing the GTA Local Food System



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as coordinated by the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance



Building the Infrastructure for Local Food: Creating Private/Public Partnerships

Proceedings from the April 30-May 1 conference

On April 30 and May 1, 2009, more than 100 people representing diverse agri-food sectors met to explore the challenges and opportunities for building local food infrastructure in Ontario. These proceedings, based on a recorded transcription, document the conference presentations and the critical questions and ideas raised.

You are invited to a follow up conference on April 16, 2010 at the North York Civic Centre to develop an action plan to build local food infrastructure.

Event Sponsors: Caledon Countryside Alliance, Greater Toronto Area Agricultural Action Committee, Informa Market Research, Local Food Plus, Toronto Economic Development, Toronto Food Policy Council, Sodexo Canada, and Sustain Ontario.

Conference Purpose and Process

The April 30/May 1 conference was the outcome of a series of local food conferences (many organized by the sponsors listed above) beginning in 2003. This most recent conference, its proceedings and the follow up conference on April 16, 2010 are part of a four-phase process to generate ideas and partnerships among key decision-makers and stakeholders across sectors. They will help answer vital policy decisions regarding the “what,” “when,” “why” and “how” of building the infrastructure needed to revitalize and sustain Ontario’s rural, peri-urban, and urban food economies. The process will end with the development of an action plan to promote and provide the basic infrastructure required to make local food more accessible to retailers, chefs, institutions, food service providers and consumers.

Our definition of local food infrastructure includes both *soft* and *hard* infrastructure. Soft infrastructure refers to the underlying knowledge, institutions, and services that enable food production, processing, distribution and retailing. Hard infrastructure refers to the physical structures that facilitate local food such as greenhouses, storage facilities, processing plants, abattoirs and distribution warehouses.

The purpose of this process is to address the need for:

- Primary processing facilities in rural Ontario for produce and meat products.
- Innovative marketing streams for local food.
- Food-compliant incubation and commercialization facilities for processors.

Overview of the April 30/May 1 Conference

Taste of Ontario Opening Reception, April 30

Welcome: Janice Etter, Chair, Toronto Food Policy Council

Introduction: Lori Stahlbrand, President, Local Food Plus

Keynote Speaker: Donald Ziraldo, Owner, Inniskillen Winery; Founder of Ontario's Vinters Quality Alliance (VQA) program

Donald Ziraldo offered an insightful presentation based on his experiences as a grower, innovator, and entrepreneur. Using examples of the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre and the VQA, Donald argued that the local Ontario food sector could gain significant growth and support from customers interested in terroir (a sense of place) and the provenance of food. Donald provided a number of suggestions about how to build and support sustainable local food infrastructure: building regional wholesale local food hubs, attracting cross-sectoral partners drawing on agricultural science and innovation, forming a greenbelt agricultural advisory council, and creating space for commercial food incubators for local entrepreneurs. Since the conference, Donald has been a guest speaker on agricultural sustainability in southern Ontario at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre and the Caledon Mayors Alliance.

Thank You: Lauren Baker, Director, Sustain Ontario

Introduction of Magdalena Kaiser-Smith: Suman Roy, Executive Chef, Sodexo

Introduction to the Taste of Ontario Reception: Magdalena Kaiser-Smith, Ontario Culinary Tourism Association (OCTA)

Comprised of regional and industry leaders, OCTA is leading efforts in research, education and product development to build capacity for culinary tourism across Ontario. Founded to advance the province's ten-year culinary tourism strategy, OCTA is dedicated to establishing Ontario as an international culinary tourism destination.

OCTA coordinated Friday's dinner showcasing four culinary regions including Savour Muskoka, Savour Stratford, Niagara Culinary Trail, and Norfolk County.

Building the Infrastructure for Local Food Conference, May 1

Welcome: Michael Wolfson, Food and Beverage Specialist, Toronto Economic Development, City of Toronto

Session 1

Why is Food an Infrastructure Issue? Perspectives from a Grocer, Food Processor, Chef, Food Service Company, and Institution.

Presenters:

Shaun Navazesh, founder of ShaSha Bread Co.

Mimmo Franzone, Produce Category Buyer, Longo's Supermarkets

Philip Levett, Chef Chat

Chris Fry, Senior Director, Supply management for Sodexo Canada

Arlene Stein, Director of Events and Catering, Hart House, University of Toronto

Susan Ho, Tea Aura Inc.

Moderator: Suman Roy, Executive Chef, Sodexo

The panelists discussed their local production efforts and challenges including distribution, maintaining product quality and consistency of pack sizes, the seasonal challenges of local procurement, consumer demand for low quality products (like imported strawberries) and distributors that do not want to change suppliers. While the panelists expressed commitment to marketing local, seasonal food, they agreed that consumer education about local food should continue and expand. The panel suggested a branding program to help consumers recognize local products and the processors and retailers providing them. They also suggested a local purchasing rebate program for restaurants and institutions to encourage local buying. Receipts of local purchases would be submitted on either a buy-in or annual basis and a percentage of sales would be reimbursed. Panelists also discussed the issue of scale-appropriate regulations and infrastructure. Producers who supply big retail (like Longo's) or distributors (like Sodexo) have to meet various regulatory requirements that should be different for producers and processors who sell from farm-gate, at farmers' markets, and through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs). Market demands are different for different scales of production and processing, for example, requirements for season extension, post-harvest handling, technology, traceability, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP), and quality audits. The panelists concluded that despite the obstacles, all local food industry sectors should help each other work towards consistent supplies of locally-grown fruits, vegetables, dairy, meat and processed foods.

Session 2

Post-Harvest Handling

Presenter: Jennifer DeEll, Fresh Market Quality Program Lead, OMAFRA

Moderator: Peter Lambrick, Chair, Greater Toronto Area Agricultural Action Committee

Jennifer DeEll from OMAFRA presented her own powerpoint slides as well as those of Dr. Adel A. Kader (Professor Emeritus, University of California). Her presentation addressed two themes: post-harvest fruit and vegetable handling, and the infrastructure required to bring out the quality and taste of Ontario produce for consumers. After reviewing the post-harvest physiology of some fruits and vegetables, Jennifer shared an action plan for ensuring well-flavoured fruit, including the following recommendations:

- Replace sub-optimal flavour cultivars with well-flavoured cultivars
- Identify optimal cultural practices that maximize flavour quality
- Encourage producers to harvest fruits at partially ripe to fully ripe stages by developing handling methods that protect the fruit from physical damage
- Identify optimum post-harvest handling conditions

Whether in the field or in temporary storage, transportation to market, or in handling at its destination, Jennifer pointed out that maintaining the cold chain for perishables is critical to ensuring produce quality and shelf life. Once a product has been harvested, some common cooling techniques used are forced-air cooling, hydro-cooling, ice cooling, and vacuum cooling. Jennifer noted that the high capital costs and operating costs (due to high energy prices) of some of these technologies were an obstacle for producers. She highlighted two new, innovative technologies that the food industry in Ontario can use to increase the shelf-life of its products. The first is controlled or modified atmosphere storage: the rate of respiration of that product is lowered because the storage room lowers the oxygen within the surrounding environment while increasing the amount of CO₂. The second is Smart Fresh: ethylene, which triggers ripening, is inhibited to bond in the fruit by an ethylene-mimic compound that takes its place, resulting in slowed ripening. Jennifer concluded by highlighting the work of her division at OMAFRA, including the development and improvement of fresh-cut apple slices, post-harvest treatments to extend the shelf life of asparagus, and the evaluation of the Smart Fresh technology on greenhouse tomatoes.

Session 3

Food Processing Incubators, Innovation and Commercialization Centres

Presenter: Robert Gibson, Senior Manager, Alberta Agri-Value Processing Business Incubator

Moderator: Michael Wolfson, Food and Beverage Specialist, Toronto Economic Development, City of Toronto; Staff advisor to the Greater Toronto Area Agricultural Action Committee

Using examples from the development of the Alberta Agri-Value Processing Business Incubator, Robert Gibson demonstrated the need for incubation and commercialization space to expand the food processing sector. The 75,000 square foot incubator facility assists the start-up of new food businesses and supports established food manufacturers that are trying to get into new areas of processing. It also brings investment from new clients and established food companies into Alberta. Robert noted that after several private and private-public ownership arrangements were considered, consultants recommended that the Alberta Agri-Value Processing Business Incubator should be built and operated by the provincial government.

Michael Wolfson delivered a presentation on the proposed International Food Processing, Incubation and Commercialization Centre project in Toronto. Since 2007, the City of Toronto has housed the Toronto Food Business Incubator that helps companies develop their products and businesses. It is hoped that it will be replaced by the International Food Processing, Incubation and Commercialization Centre which will employ up to 1,000 people and will create over 150 new food companies over ten years. Municipal, provincial and federal government buy-in will be necessary and remains a significant hurdle. Michael showed the need for such a facility, stating that between 2006 and 2007, the food industry grew by 14% in the Greater Toronto Area. Michael argued that the food industry can raise its profile amongst other major industries if everyone speaks with one voice. He also stated that processed food undeservedly gets a bad rap and that there are more “craft” than “Kraft” people in the food industry. Since the conference, the Toronto Food Business Incubator reported that it is working at capacity and developing a five-year strategic plan to expand its operations.

Session 4

Open Forum: Current Initiatives Building Infrastructure for Local Food Systems in Ontario

Moderator: Karen Hutchinson, Executive Director, Caledon Countryside Alliance

This open forum session enabled participants to share concerns, comments, and current local food infrastructure initiatives. Their discussion about how to build infrastructure for local food in Ontario is summarized in the “Ideas and Challenges Ahead” section of these proceedings.

Some of the organizations and individuals who spoke were:

Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) – Gary Wilkins reported that the TRCA is working to build new partnerships, continue its land extension programs, and has adopted an agricultural policy. It is also working on a local procurement policy that could serve 100,000 meals per year to young children at four TRCA outdoor education centres.

Niagara Agricultural Task Force – Arden Vaughan discussed the disappearance of provincially-run abattoirs and stand-alone processing plants in Ontario.

Local Food Plus (LFP) – With about 160 certified farmers and processors, Lori Stahlbrand highlighted LFP initiatives, including connecting institutions interested in local food procurement with LFP-certified farmers and processors, and a new website that will enable a search for LFP-certified products by postal code.

Toronto Public Health (TPH) – Peter Dorfman reported that TPH is writing the Toronto Food Strategy and encouraged participants to comment on the draft.

Durham Poultry Advisory Committee – Hugh shared his frustrations over the restrictions for farmers who work the Oak Ridges Moraine section of the Greenbelt.

Sustain Ontario – Lauren Baker reported that Sustain Ontario is working on an initiative called Local Food, Local Jobs which looks at the economic impact of local food and the potential for building and strengthening regional food economies across the province.

Philip Levesque suggested that one way of remaking the middle of local food infrastructure could come by resurrecting the canning industry in Ontario.

Vic Daniels stated that despite willing workers, meat production jobs may be at risk because only 20% of meat consumed from grocery stores is from Ontario. Vic explained that he sits on a committee that is establishing a management protocol for raising livestock within Ontario whereby farmers would have an environmental farm plan and would not use growth hormones in beef cattle.

Canadian Biochar Initiative – Floyd Helferty suggested that biochar (charcoal from agricultural products or by-products) can help different industries cross-collaborate to build and, in places affected by the closure of processing facilities, reestablish local manufacturing clusters.

GTA Action Plan Committee – Ted Eng shared his views on farmer frustration with slow or unresponsive governments and government farm programs.

Jennifer Pfenning who is a grower, packer, and distributor, argued that the notion that local producers always use inconsistent pack sizes is misleading. She noted that her operation uses the same pack sizes as those from California and she has seen as many or more size inconsistencies with imported products.

Session 5

Next Steps and Closing

Presenter: Wayne Roberts, Acting Manager, Toronto Food Policy Council

Wayne Roberts from the Toronto Food Policy Council reviewed the conference's accomplishments and steps to move forward. Wayne emphasized that building a local, sustainable, healthy, diverse, accessible and viable food system is fundamentally about building relationships. With conference participation of farmers, food service providers, retailers, NGOs, academics, and government, Wayne noted that relationship building was a successful feature of the conference. He concluded by identifying features of a successful local food infrastructure movement, including partnership-building, "co-opetition", speaking with one voice, collaboration, and prioritization.

Building Local Food Infrastructure in Ontario: Ideas and Challenges Ahead

Many ideas and critical questions about building Ontario's local food infrastructure emerged out of the conference. Please read this next section carefully as the ideas and questions will form the basis of the April 16, 2010 conference and an action plan to move forward. Note that this section is extracted from transcripts of the conference and does not necessarily reflect the views of the sponsoring organizations.

The need for cross-sectoral collaboration

The conference was an opportunity to bring together a diverse set of voices from the regional food and farming community to discuss re-establishing local food infrastructure. Many voices were heard, illustrating the plurality of the food sector.

It was suggested that an infrastructure gold standard (judged by criteria of locality, sustainability, health, diversity, accessibility and viability) is possible through creative collaborations, "co-opetition," listening to one another, and patience.

Emphasis was placed on sharing responsibility among the private, public and non-profit sectors for a sustainable regional food economy. This responsibility includes mutual accountability, support and cooperation, and high work standards and should be reflected in education, branding, and collaborative efforts. Increasing collaboration between producers, processors, large retailers and food service providers will mainstream the local food movement. To increase needed market share for all regional producers and processors, creative relationship building between actors and sectors will be essential.

Some possibilities for collaboration that emerged out of the conference include:

- Greenbelt agricultural advisory council
- Post-harvest cooling research and development
- Incubation and commercialization facilities for processors
- Food delivery distribution mechanisms
- Biochar initiative
- Small enterprise financing and support
- Farmer driven research
- Agri- and culinary tourism
- Virtual forum and in-person opportunities to foster collaboration, share and track research, and co-operatively address critical issues

Questions posed by participants:

What does local food infrastructure that nurtures and sustains creativity, discussion, and relationships look like?

Can we create a forum to share our work, experience and grievances? What would such a forum look like?

Branding local food

Branding and the challenge of identifying local food emerged as an important issue at the conference. Branding helps the customer recognize a local product and the efforts of the producer, processor or food service provider to support it. The VQA and the Homegrown Ontario branding programs were reviewed. VQA branding draws on the popularity of terroir. People are willing to support and pay more for wine from Prince Edward county, beef from Perth county, or cheese from the Kawarthas because they are increasingly interested in the origin of their food. Building on the VQA success, it was asked if the branding of terroir should be used to promote local food and if so, what foods – cheese, pears, apples, beef? Can Ontario take lessons from Quebec who is more advanced in this area? Regardless of the approach, it was emphasized that government should support the collaborative work of producers and processors on creative branding and labeling solutions.

Questions posed by participants:

Can we develop consistent messages that educate the public regarding a sustainable local food system?

How do we nurture regional identities across Ontario through branding and the notion of terroir?

Facilitating local food transactions

Ontario has regional differences that necessitate regional solutions. In addition, there is a need to increase the availability of local food beyond the growing season. The creation of regional food clusters could address different regional needs and facilitate local food transactions.

Specific suggestions about how to encourage local food sales included:

- Regional wholesale markets
- Local rebate buying program that gives an incentive to larger buyers by reimbursing a small percentage of their local purchases
- On-line system that links local food sellers and buyers, for example, a local food portal or database.

Questions posed by participants:

Can we develop a system that identifies regional food clusters while promoting all Ontario producers? What does it look like?

The abattoir dilemma

Several conference participants warned that Ontario is losing provincially regulated abattoirs at an alarming rate. It was acknowledged that a deeper understanding of the federal and provincial regulations is necessary to address the long-term viability of Ontario's meat industry. The year-round availability of meat, unlike produce, should be capitalized upon. A distinction was made between provincially inspected abattoirs for local production and federally inspected abattoirs and processing plants for export. An examination of the regulatory burden facing meat producers was suggested. A public campaign encouraging consumers to demand regionally-produced meat could also assist meat producers and processors. Since the conference, Sodexo has announced its intention to start a pilot purchasing program for meat procured from provincially regulated local abattoirs.

Questions posed by participants:

Can the idea of regional food clusters and/or terroir be used to insist that each region has abattoirs and meat processing capacity to meet regional demand?

What short, medium, and long-term actions can we take as a group in order to address the loss of provincially inspected abattoirs and primary processing plants?

Investment in primary and secondary processing and commercialization

Primary and secondary fruit and vegetable processing were identified as key aspects of local food infrastructure. Post-harvest handling is central to produce quality, consistency and availability. There is a need for research, development and innovation in post-harvest handling for multiple scales of production. The costs of newer cold-storage facilities are prohibitive. Producers could use equipment co-operatively to share costs. The public should be taught how to handle and store produce to extend quality.

The province is losing stand-alone processing facilities. Commercial incubator initiatives have promise for innovation and commercialization to benefit the regional food system. Producers can diversify into value-added foods while small enterprises have an easier time sourcing local foods. From an environmental and economic perspective, commercial incubators enable import substitution.

Questions posed by participants:

How can we support the development of primary and secondary processing activities in Ontario?

Scale-appropriate regulations and infrastructure

Panelists also discussed the issue of scale-appropriate regulations and infrastructure. Producers who supply big retail (like Longo's) or distributors (like Sodexo) have to meet various regulatory requirements that should be different for producers and processors who sell from farm-gate, at farmers' markets, and through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs). Market demands are different for different scales of production and processing, for example, requirements for season extension, post-harvest handling, technology, traceability, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP), and quality audits. These demands carry financial costs that may be prohibitive to some producers and processors, illustrating the need for access to capital and scale-appropriate regulations. Similarly, infrastructure needs to be scale-appropriate. Heavy infrastructure includes larger processing facilities and light infrastructure includes transaction facilitation mechanisms.

Questions posed by participants:

How can the needs of both heavy and light infrastructure users be balanced, considering that many producers need both?

Can we develop scale-appropriate infrastructure that supports the varying needs and demands of producers in different sectors?

The environmental, social and economic imperatives

Participants expressed the need for a holistic view of building local food infrastructure. From an environmental standpoint, what are the energy requirements of post-harvest technology and processing technologies? More research is needed into the energy use of various food production technologies. Programs like Green Rewards, Zerofootprint, and Alternative Land Use Services deserve more attention. From a social justice perspective, how can local food infrastructure meet diverse cultural requirements and address the issue of affordability and access for low-income Ontarians? From an economic perspective, how can local food enhance the viability of rural communities? From a human health perspective, how can local food infrastructure acknowledge and support those working on health problems such as obesity and diabetes?

Questions posed by participants:

How can we build local food infrastructure that addresses concerns for the environment, social justice, and human health?

Education

The public education campaign for eating local has been fairly successful. Other educational needs of the public and the food and farming sector were identified. The public should be taught how to access and store local, seasonal food. Food service providers should increase promotion and labeling of local foods. Foodland Ontario should undertake an educational campaign that promotes eat locally in the winter. Farmers and processors need to know what foods and varieties are wanted by ethnically diverse urban populations. Food and farming skills need to be re-introduced into elementary and high school curricula so that more students learn to appreciate local food and consider careers in the food and farming sector. The food and farming sector in Ontario needs to understand the various players better. The sector should coordinate research and development and work together on policy initiatives.

Questions posed by participants:

Can we embed public education in the promotion of local foods and a local food infrastructure? What might that look like?

Identifying appropriate policy paths

There are many policy paths to consider. What are the priorities and how can we agree to work together to achieve change that supports the food and farming sector as a whole? How do we capitalize on the momentum surrounding local food, such as Premier McGuinty's support for local food procurement? Several participants raised the idea of a Ministry of Food. The VQA example illustrates the importance of producers and processors working together to drive policy shifts. A framework is needed to promote local food and to show that local food works and is in demand. Government could then be approach regarding legislation and regulatory shifts. There is a shared responsibility to work towards solutions.

Questions posed by participants:

How will we approach policy change? Can we afford to wait for government?