

## **Real food and YEEPIes bringing it to market**

by Ralph C. Martin

It is refreshing to be confronted with passion, based on integrity. In late February, farmers, processors, distributors, teachers and butchers, bakers ... you get the picture ... met for the fourth annual Source It Here Network & Learn event at Ignatius Jesuit Centre, near Guelph. It was organized by an efficient team of Guelph Wellington Local Food.

After sampling savoury food we heard a panel of speakers who practice and then preach. One of the panelists told us about the courage required from some to publically share their stories. For someone like myself who talks and writes frequently, it was a reminder that genuine experience trumps speaking skills. The audience was all ears.

The first panelist, Trish Scott of Whispering Meadows, near Guelph, provided insights about their family beef farm. I was rapidly taking notes but my pen stopped when she said “we sell connections and partnership packaged as beef.” This one line clarifies their business approach. They listen to their customers and distributors and partners at the slaughter facility as well as other beef farmers, animal nutritionists, genetics experts and family members and offer a product that reflects the potential synergies of the whole value chain.

Trish also noted that they cap production at what they can manage. I wonder how many other businesses would survive longer to keep their customers happy if they followed this advice.

Jean Beauchemin of Morton Wholesale Ltd, based in Oldcastle, told us their small Canadian food distribution company has been in business over three generations. Although numbers are crucial to the financial success of such an enterprise, he noted that food stories, especially about local food, are becoming more important. Their customers want a fair price, as well as stories.

Chris Jess is a chef and teaches at the Central Wellington District High School in Fergus. What does he tell his students? “If you can cook well, you’ll have lots of friends.” That’s a great lesson for youth and the rest of us. Chris used the “I” word, repeatedly. Integrity is the basis of good food. Food with integrity involves less preparation time, is easier to cook with and tastes better. Integrity in food will help us to properly value food again.

Josh Whitehead of Green Table Foods in Guelph has not been intimidated by voices advocating a larger scale for food processors. He chooses to work with local family farms and talks about partnerships and local fair trade. Unique products such as beet and pumpkin hummus attract customers.

With a quizzical smile he wondered out loud why authentic local products always have to be the same. He asked, “Why not treat good food like wine and accept that some years there are interesting variations?”

Cori Claus from the Harvest Table, a family butcher shop in Parker said that among other requests, their business is responding to customers who do not want nitrate in their meat. “If it is a good product, we do not have to hide anything.” She noted the colour of meat is then less bright and with communication (which seems to be plentiful in their shop) their customers understand this is part of the package. They are also very alert to food safety requirements and to offering affordable products.

These young entrepreneurs (they are all young) were refreshing in their outlook and ways of working. It was apparent they had learned well, whether from experience or by listening and collaborating with others. However, they were not sitting back and waiting for a guarantee that if they follow a formula their lives will be fine. They are writing, testing and re-writing the formulae.

They are great examples of YEEPies (Young Ecological Entrepreneurial Practitioners). We need more people like them as we forge our way into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The baggage we carry from the 20<sup>th</sup> century is considerable as well as our notions about how to proceed. Living and eating well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may become quite different than the patterns we now follow.

Much of what is eaten now is processed and convenient, requiring very little thought and preparation before it is chewed once or twice and swallowed with almost no attention nor intention. Many meals are eaten in cars while rushing to appointments or recreational activities, often with loud music.

The YEEPies at the Source it Here event are not serving the pick-up, gulp and burp crowd. They understand that real food has value and it is worth deliberation, time, money, careful handling and appreciation.

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