

Washing Vegetables

by Ralph C. Martin

In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice.

In practice there is. Yogi Berra

As one ensconced in academia, I recognize that I tend to tilt toward theory. Thank goodness there are also many practitioners who know how to make things happen.

Mark Kenny and his colleagues in Hospitality Services at the University of Guelph are practical people. Food services at the University of Guelph, unlike at many other universities, are not contracted to an off-campus food service provider. The recipes are developed on campus in response to available local food, which is actively sought. Currently, 45% of seasonal fresh produce is local, much of it from the Elmira Produce Auction Co-op and some from the Guelph Centre for Urban Organic Farming, situated on campus.

Hospitality Services has been the number one Food Service organization of medium universities, in Canada, for the last nine years. This spring, Guelph Wellington Local Food named Hospitality Services as one of their Brand Champion Award Winners for proudly promoting the Taste Real Brand on campus. In addition, Hospitality Services is one of five of Ontario's Local Food champions as designated by the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, in February, 2012.

However, these are only steps on a longer journey of sustaining healthy food systems. In April, a new vegetable processing facility began operating in the basement of Creelman Hall. With a grant from the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, the old (100 years plus) vegetable room was restored. The original planners had it right.

My impression of the room is of large windows along one stone wall to brighten a white room, furnished with stainless steel. There is now a fancy washing sink with 9 jets to generate amazing swirls of water. Although bags of vegetables needed washing and polite folks on our tour packed the room, I was still tempted to squeeze myself into the sink.

Soil-stained (or should I say soil-enhanced) potatoes and carrots were poured into mesh baskets, treated with a royal water cleansing and scooped out of the sink ready for peeling. An automatic potato peeler removed most of the potato peels without wasting the flesh of the tubers. Engineers really can produce precise and useful tools.

Chef Gordon Cooledge listened patiently to chatter about the new facility making it possible to source local vegetables from nearby fields and to prepare them in a timely manner, with cost efficient methods, for the thousands of students and staff on campus. Some on the tour speculated about the temptation to buy thoroughly washed and processed vegetables which are ready to go, from one convenient source, as many other large institutions do. “For me, it’s the freshness of the product,” stated Chef Gord with a tone of voice that did not invite a rebuttal from theoretical academics. He emphasized that it is more pleasurable to cook with fresh produce and then also much easier to please his customers.

The new processing facility also reduces food waste. Ends of peppers, and odd shaped vegetables can be set aside to be diced into soups and chilies where shape is of no consequence for presentation, as it is in fresh salads.

Until now Hospitality Services has been a good customer for local farmers as their produce is used during the growing season. The new facility, with enhanced storage capacity, means that more local produce will be purchased, stored and then processed during the non-growing season. Kenny is also contracting with local growers to hold vegetables in cold storage. These are practical steps in the direction my colleagues and I theorize must be traveled in order to grow capacity for offering Ontario food to consumers all year.

Is the vegetable processing facility the most spectacular innovation at the University of Guelph, in the last year? Perhaps not, but it is noteworthy, and it stands as a practical refutation to those who argue that the world has become too streamlined and too efficient to accommodate anything other than small amounts of food with the attributes of fresh and local. With a recipe of deliberation, determination, and dedication, the staff at Hospitality Services are leaders on a journey of discovering how we can have the food we want, and eat it too.

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