

HIGH SCHOOL CAFETERIA

BOASTS LOCAL ON THE MENU



By Madeleine Greey

Locally grown organic food is the star attraction at Gulf Islands Secondary School cafeteria on Salt Spring Island, B.C.

Three to four hundred students, staff and local residents enjoy lunch at the school four days a week, enjoying such mouth-watering creations as heirloom tomato, feta and basil salad; rainbow chard quiche; and roasted Hubbard squash lasagne made creamy with béchamel and spiked with home grown tarragon.

“When we have it, we advertise it,” says chef and teacher Al Irving, referring to local, organic food. “It outsells the stuff delivered by truck, hands down.”

The great local food is also inspiring a new breed of culinary program where students learn knife skills and food safety while gaining a much deeper appreciation of the origins of their food.

“Many of my students had never thought about this before,” muses Irving. “But when a flat full of

local cherry tomatoes comes in the door and a fellow student pipes up ‘I grew these in my garden,’ it doesn’t get any closer to home than that.”

Last fall, the school’s culinary program joined forces with Canadian Organic Growers in an innovative project called Growing Up Organic (GUO), which aims to increase marketing opportunities for organic farmers and provide local organic food to youth. Irving’s culinary program and cafeteria kitchen is one such market. With monthly food orders exceeding \$9,000, the high school is one of Salt Spring Island’s largest food purchasers. One quarter of the cafeteria’s overall food purchases are now made locally, thanks largely to the efforts of GUO Project Coordinator, Pat Reichert.

Just a year ago, the island community’s high school kitchen relied solely on off-island food or what Reichert calls “big truck” food. All of this food was conventionally grown, imported and “shockingly cheap,” says Reichert.

Reichert knows better than most how much it costs

Photo above: Students in the cook certificate program at the Gulf Islands Secondary School tour Stowel Lake Farm with chef/teacher Al Irving and Milly Sinclair, the assistant chef.



At Stowel Lake Farm, students learn about different varieties of greens from farm manager Rebecca Bloch.

to grow good food. She is a strong supporter of sustainable agriculture and is deeply concerned about the island's loose grip on food sovereignty. Only four percent of Salt Spring Island's food is produced locally with the lion's share met by imports. While the local COG chapter, Island Natural Growers, has set a goal to double local production by 2011, that increased supply won't mean anything unless there are buyers. That's why all eyes are focused on Gulf Islands Secondary School.

"I'd forgotten what a tomato tasted like," says Irving, until box after box of colourful heirloom beauties started coming in the kitchen door last September. "I put out a flat for the students to try and they vanished. Kids were two-handing them into their mouths!"

Chief helmsman of 68 culinary students, Irving has his hands full. In less than four hours, he and his "employees" produce more than just lunch—it sounds like a smorgasbord with two daily soups, several entrées, lots of vegetable dishes, a different hot sandwich every day, freshly baked bread and dessert.

Despite what Irving understandably considers a "nerve-racking morning," he still finds time to introduce his students to the finer details, such as the difference—both in taste and appearance—between an imported melon versus a local, organically grown one. His students have come to appreciate that imported produce may win in good looks, yet often lacks the fresh, deep flavour of locally grown food.

"Each of my students has had an epiphany moment with this," says Irving who's the first to admit that he'd never find the time in his busy schedule to identify, order and arrange delivery of all the local organic food that his kitchen/classroom now celebrates.

That job remains the domain of Reichert who rallied a dozen, tentative farmers by her side last September and now boasts an arsenal of three dozen ready to supply the school's kitchen this year. Each week, Reichert finds out what's ready to harvest, and then supplies Irving with an order sheet and waits for his reply. Then she goes from farm to farm, picks up orders, delivers them and supplies Irving with a single, simple invoice.

She revels in her job as chief distributor. "Every week I get to handle some of the most breathtakingly beautiful produce in the world," she says. It doesn't hurt that she seems to know everyone on this 180-square-kilometre island and, accordingly, it's up to her to organize numerous meetings among the farmers—sometimes with potential buyers.

Last fall, Irving, along with many of the island's chefs, attended one such meeting where he could finally "put a face" to so many of his suppliers. At the same time, he struck up conversations with cattle, poultry and sheep farmers, plus cheesemakers. A few weeks later, he received an offer he couldn't refuse.

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The school bought the entire carcass of an organically raised cow. "The students learned how to butcher 800 pounds of fresh beef," says Irving. "No kid is likely to ever see that again!"

So they named the cow Prudence and put Prudence goulash on the menu at the cafeteria.

"What kid likes goulash?" says Irving. "But because it was local, because it was organic, and because they'd been involved in the butchering process, any time we put Prudence on the menu, we were sold out."

Madeleine Greey is a Toronto food writer who grows arugula, Dinosaur kale and Yellow Lollipop tomatoes in her backyard.

Photo credits: Anne Macey