

# What's For Dinner, Alberta?

*Steak and potatoes, yes, but also ostrich, Gouda cheese, organic veggies and chokecherry vinaigrette—all home-grown*

BY JANE HARRIS

When I first heard the term “Alberta regional cuisine,” I visualized the foods I ate when I was growing up—barbecued steak with fresh garden peas, roast beef, new potatoes and gravy, farm fresh chickens, and saskatoon pies from the fresh berries my sister and I spent hours picking.

Well, Alberta cuisine still includes steak, potatoes and Saskatoon pie. But producers and restaurant chefs are heeding the call from an increasingly multifarious province. These days, Albertans’ selective taste buds can be satisfied by home-grown products as varied as succulent strawberries, fresh herbs, savoury goat feta cheese, juicy red tomatoes, honey, tender Taber corn, lamb, lasagna, organic flour, meat pies, organically produced chicken, beef, South American hot sauce, bison, ostrich, Gouda cheese—even lollipops.

There’s ample evidence that Albertans prefer to eat fresh local food products. Focus groups conducted by the Alberta Food Processors Association (AFPA) make evident that, even though we can buy anything from Texas

beef to French Brie, we prefer fresh, local food and want to support our local producers, according to Arnold De Leeuw, Vice President, Trade and Business Services. Carl Ryan, perishables manager at Save-On Foods in Lethbridge, agrees, citing consumer demand as an important reason the Langley, B.C.-based grocery chain supports Alberta and B.C. producers and processors. “People demand and expect it.”

“There is a ton of Alberta-made products,” says Ryan, pointing to flour, potato chips, sugar, sunflower seeds, pickled garlic, lasagna and hot sauce. He says consumers are often unaware how much of the food they purchase is grown or processed in Alberta.

Life in the production and distribution of regional food

products in Alberta, however, cannot be construed as that proverbial bowl of cherries. Our taste buds may be globally welcoming, but so, increasingly, are our market borders. National boundaries no longer ensure we’re getting locally grown food. And that means competition—and lots of it—for regional producers.



ALBERTA AGRICULTURE

BUT THERE ARE SOME PRODUCERS, such as John Schussler, owner/operator of Bridgeberry Farms, who just don't let the competition, or anything else, stand in their way. Since 1997, Schussler's vision and determination have turned this down-to-earth farmer into a full-time producer of organic jams, jellies, fruit leather and, his latest, chokecherry and six-fruit vinaigrette salad dressing. His black-rhubarb juice is a sweet combination of rhubarb and black-currant juice that he first whipped up in his home blender.

Now, Schussler, who once owned a dairy farm near Lethbridge, has his sights on conquering not only the

South America. Last fall, their family specialty, Basil's Fire and Brimstone Hot Sauce, made it to the shelves of Save-On Food Stores in both Alberta and British Columbia, a desired item for Albertans who may have only the vaguest idea where Guyana is.

Though, at first blush, it may not seem that South American hot sauce could be called an Albertan regional food, Basil's Fire and Brimstone Hot Sauce does fit into our regional cuisine tradition. From the time the first white settlers arrived, new waves of immigrants have borrowed and shared favourite dishes—bannock, Scottish scones, Ukrainian perogies—with neighbours. The

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Canadian market, but the international one as well. "I don't listen to the experts too much. A lot of experts don't know how to address [my business]."

It's not surprising Schussler's operation confounds the experts—he admits his products are too expensive to be listed in most supermarkets. In spite of this, he has built a substantial clientele by pounding the pavement and giving out lots of samples—each gift pack is worth \$50. Schussler's plan is simple: keep marketing to the high-end restaurants, hotels and stores.

Originally funded by CAIP (Canadian Agricultural Infrastructure Program), Bridgeberry Farms has begun to attract both international and local investors. And Schussler has built an impressive list of clients, including CP hotels and the Sheraton Eau Claire and Westin hotels in Calgary. In addition, he sells in high-end specialty stores, and unlike many regional producers, his goods are listed by national and international distributors. Currently, his delicacies are being reviewed for export markets in South Africa, Europe, Britain and Australia.

A director of the Canadian Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, the North American Black Currant Association, and the Fruit Growers Association of Alberta, Schussler remains most comfortable when he's harvesting berries or manufacturing sweet cuisine in his \$1-million Southern Alberta Fruit Processing Centre, eight kilometres southeast of Lethbridge. "I'm more of a farm type of guy—not a suits type of guy," he says.

Schussler isn't the only regional processor who is successfully breaking all the rules. Consider the Simmons family. In 1976, Basil and Hilda Simmons and their daughter, Margaret, arrived in Lethbridge from Guyana,

Simmonses have adapted their traditional sauce for the Canadian market, incorporating mangoes and cucumbers to give it a unique flavour and golden colour suited to the taste of Albertans. And it can be used, they point out, on almost any type of food: curries, potato salad, salsa, barbecue sauces, chicken wings, and soups—even strawberry dip.

Only as recently as 1998, the family began to share their sauce with visitors to the Heritage Day Ethnic Food Fair in Lethbridge. Soon after, they took it to farmers' markets and specialty shops. Their big break, into the Overwaitea chain, came when staff in Lethbridge's Save-On Foods asked Margaret why she was purchasing large quantities of Scotch bonnet peppers. Discovering the family was manufacturing a hot sauce, staff asked to test it, loved it, and moved quickly to get it on the store's shelves.

Part of the Simmonses' success is undoubtedly due to Albertans' growing love for ethnic foods, but it is also a result of the family's determination to get through all the licensing, labeling and testing hoops and regulations. Plus, well, the Simmonses just have a passion for showing Albertans how to use this spicy sauce. Explains Margaret, "We demo it. That's part of our education process."

Some producers choose to remain small in order to preserve uniqueness and quality. Beauquet Herbs, the hand-packaged mint teas produced by Kristy Piquette and Eileen Beaudin of St. Paul, Alberta, depend upon the sunshine, soil and climate of northern Alberta to cultivate their freshness and flavour. "As you go around the world, mint is going to have a different flavour," explains Piquette, adding that her teas taste much fresher than those purchased in supermarkets.

Piquette and Beaudin focus their marketing on north-eastern Alberta, and the partners have little desire to move away from hand-picking and packaging the teas. Beaudin continues to grow the herbs on her farm, while Piquette packages and markets them. The partners sell their teas at farmers' markets and through a website.

"THE BEST CUISINES IN THE WORLD are regional cuisines," says Mario Mathieu, Executive Chef at the Hotel Macdonald in Edmonton. Mathieu has been seeking out regional foods since his days as a chef at Kananaskis Lodge. He actively looks for local and, especially, organic products, including Alberta beef, lamb and cheeses; organic chicken; and Bow River trout. The hotel also grows tomatoes and herbs in its own garden.

Still, Mathieu is sometimes frustrated in his attempts to find Alberta-made products for his menu. At times he has no choice but to purchase imported foods from traditional brokers. "It's easier and less time consuming," he explains, adding that he doesn't understand why, with over 3,500 organic producers in Alberta, it can be so difficult to procure certified organic food.

It seems that those trying to get a regional food product into the hands of a consumer or a chef face no small hurdle. According to De Leeuw, of the AFPA, regional processors who want to move from the kitchen to the supermarket shelves must come up with something unique and be cost-competitive. Production plants must be up to government and retailer standards, while meat exported from Alberta must pass through a federally inspected plant.

Producers can afford to expand before they have found that larger market. On the other hand, if growing pains inherent in increasing production affect quality before a product gets to its new market, the producer can lose credibility and sales.

Even the thought of scaling up to a national distributor such as Serca Scott National is bound to make some local producers cling to local markets. Formidable challenges await potential listees. "For the small, regional food processor, it's very difficult," says Vice President Vaughn Thompson. "How would you supply them in P.E.I. or Victoria?" Still, regionally grown potatoes and produce do make their way onto Serca Scott National's list. "We've got some big, big growers in southern Alberta." The national distributor moves more than 560,000 cases of potatoes a day from its Calgary facility alone.

While competition for shelf space is stiff, regional products do find their way into your local grocery store. According to Toby Oswald, Vice President, Public Affairs, for Canada Safeway, there is some flexibility in the procedure that sees a product carried regularly on Safeway shelves. Producers must meet health and safety standards (meat must be federally inspected) and consistently supply 212 stores, and there may be a fee for shelf space. But the store will test the market for regional producers, such as Spolumbo's Sausage in Calgary and Branigan's Lasagna in Winnipeg. Hopefuls in the Calgary market, for instance, have to supply 28 stores—30,000 customers per week. "Entrepreneurship is flourishing. We give [entrepreneurs] the opportunities," Oswald says.

And now, supermarkets are even breaking their own

## Upscale versions of traditional Canadian cuisine—saskatoon

**berry relish, air-dried buffalo, Alberta lamb sausage, Swiss chard, and roasted rhubarb couscous salad—are popular with tourists.**

As retailers increase in size it will be more difficult for new producers to gain entry into the retail market. "There are less and less buyers; they don't have time talk to everyone who just has one product," says De Leeuw. Appropriate marketing and promotion are vital, as is appropriate packaging, to ensure the product gets to the consumer undamaged.

Then too, there's the ever-present supply conundrum: a producer must persuade a retail buyer that s/he can produce a reliable supply, usually by establishing a track record at farmers' markets and smaller retail outlets. To maintain quality and satisfy year-round demand requires good time management and coordination. Growing in anticipation of increased markets is a big risk. Few pro-

ducers. Five years ago, after more than 45 years in the supermarket business, the DeBaji family created its first fresh food market in Edmonton. Nehad DeBaji of DeBaji's Fresh Markets in Calgary and Edmonton says his family's gourmet markets carry a large number of Alberta products such as Zinger Brown dips, hot jalapeno jelly, and antipasto.

"You won't see this kind of market anywhere. Our market is a totally fresh [one]," says DeBaji, whose outlets include restaurants, flower areas, delicatessens, bakeries, fresh fish, cold prepared foods, European meats and cheeses, produce and gourmet foods to go. Items purchased directly from growers are imported from all over the world.

“DEFINITELY, I’M SEEING A TRANSFORMATION in the industry,” says Colleen Biggs of T-K Ranch in Coronation, a producer and a broker for other producers. It has taken only two years for Biggs to go from looking for markets for her own family’s grass-fed Angus beef (and finding few takers) to being a full-time advocate for Alberta regional cuisine. Today, in addition to her own organic beef, she brokers Alberta-made Gouda, organic chicken, goat milk chocolate sauce and cheeses to restaurants, health food stores and specialty shops. Every week, she spends hours on the phone and on the road, meeting with chefs and producers. And doors all over the province appear to be opening. Biggs is also director of Earth to Table, a provincial grassroots non-profit organization of producers and chefs working to bring regional foods to restaurant tables.

Formed in 1996, Earth to Table promotes natural, fresh, local produce grown through “sustainable food practices.” Its growth has been rapid and membership now stretches from Kananaskis to Jasper, Edmonton, Peace River and Didsbury. It seems the clientele of Alberta’s finest restaurants want to eat homegrown food prepared with loving care. At the national level, Cuisine Canada, an alliance of food professionals, promotes Canadian food and wine and promotes awareness of the diversity of regional cooking. Northern Bounty IV, its semi-annual conference, to

be held at Jasper Park Lodge in October, will highlight Prairie cuisine.

Before the founding of Earth to Table, Victoria Adams, Sous Chef at the River Café on Prince’s Island in downtown Calgary, was often frustrated in her search for fresh, local products for her menu. Her clientele tends to be business people and tourists looking for regional items, she says. To meet the demand, the menu boasts a decidedly upscale version of traditional Canadian cuisine: saskatoon berry relish, air-dried buffalo, goat cheese, spicy Alberta lamb sausage, Swiss chard, roasted rhubarb couscous salad, Alberta Angus beef, free-range chicken breast and Alberta Hereford rib eye. Trained in Stratford, Ontario, “where it’s very normal for growers to show up at your back door,” Adams found it difficult to adjust to the practice in Alberta restaurants of ordering produce once a week.

She now sees “quite an increase in the diversity” of regional foods available, and believes Albertans can create a vibrant regional cuisine. “We have an odd growing season, but we also have lots of sunlight. We can grow just about anything.” She favours sustainable or organic growing methods and has found that local products grown using these practices are on par with or even a little cheaper than imported products. Adams concedes, however, that packaged organic grocery products are often more expensive.

Gary Frye, Executive Chef at the Mount Royal Hotel in Banff, agrees that regional products are popular with visitors to our province. “They deserve to try our products,” he says. Beef, bison rib eye specials, veal, wild goose, duck breast, saskatoon berries, even ostrich find their way onto his menu, and because he caters to international visitors, Frye’s definition of regional cuisine extends beyond our provincial borders to include B.C. fruits and Arctic cloud berries.

DESPITE THE CHALLENGES, Chef Mathieu remains optimistic. Ultimately, he believes, the industry will survive its growing pains, and producers, chefs and their clientele will create the demand for regionally grown and processed foods. In the meantime, he says, “we’re all learning.”

If a transformation is to take place in the regional industry, it’s up to every participant on the way from grower to consumer. Do we really want to eat Alberta beef, locally produced vegetables and gourmet saskatoon berry pie? We take the ultimate test each time we open our wallets.

A third-generation Albertan, Jane Harris is a Lethbridge freelance writer. She writes on the social, historical and business life of the province, and delights in sampling the foods that make up our regional cuisine.