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## NEWS LOCAL

# Second annual Grey County Chefs Forum



By Bill Henry, Sun Times, Owen Sound  
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A year ago, Roy and Ginny Love had a big home garden and hopes of going commercial.

This week at the event they said helped launch their business, the Grey Highlands couple showed off microgreens and other produce their new Roy'L Acres Farm now supplies to 20 restaurants and several local food markets.

The Loves were among two dozen producers and some 35 chefs and local food retailers at the second annual Grey County Chefs Forum in Maxwell.

Soon after attending the first forum a year ago and hearing what chefs want on their

restaurant tables, Roy Love said he tilled up another 16,000 square feet — more than quadrupling the size. Their naturally grown edibles, including microgreens and shoots for salads, sandwiches and garnishes, have “sold out every week” this growing season.

Linda Reader, who heads the volunteer grassroots organizing committee, credits Feversham-based, high-profile celebrity chef Michael Stadlander with the idea for the forum.

“It’s a business-to-business marketing opportunity that puts chefs face to face with the farmers that grow the food,” said Reader, an economic development consultant with a focus on rural communities.

The event wasn’t open to the public.

“This isn’t consumer to farmer. There’s lots of that already. Every single community has some kind of a map where you can go find a farmer, but what the farmers are finding is the chefs aren’t looking them up because they’re so busy,” Reader said.

Stadlander is both a producer with his own Eigensinn Farm, a chef and Haisai Restaurant owner known for natural, quality local ingredients for more than 20 years. Some chefs at the event said his profile was part of what drew them there.

Stadlander said farmers are often too shy to approach chefs, which is what they should do.

“You have to go and knock on the chef’s door. If you don’t do that, nothing will happen,” he said. “In the end, if you have an excellent product, the word will spread.”

He said next year he’d like to see the event include a dinner of local product, by local chefs, with tickets for the public. That would further spread word about the best of the local food.

“The whole local food movement is really just catching on,” he said.

But Stadlander also said the movement is more about quality than local, although small, regional producers are more likely to raise the best food products.

“Local food is one thing, but if the quality is not there why should we buy it? But the point is that you really can have top quality in Grey County,” he said.

Reader agreed.

“From my point of view as an economic development person, this is a way to reboot rural economies,” said Reader who hopes to promote the event as a template for other communities.

Food producers, chefs and buyers for local food markets at the event said it was a chance to connect about both the product and such challenges as transportation.

“It always comes down to where are you located and how can we get the product to our place,” said Pat McNeil.

She and her husband David grow garlic and 12 varieties of heirloom and specialty potatoes, as well as other produce just north of Markdale. They are more than hobbyists, but still “dabbling” while working jobs off the farm, David McNeil said.

Pat said their business grows each year. Contacts made last year boosted their sales and encouraged three more varieties of potatoes.

Transportation can be a problem, though, she said.

“We always try to deal with that the best that we can. Sometimes it’s meeting halfway or whatever we can arrange.”

At the Beaver Valley Ski Club, executive chef Keith Hagedorn said he looks for local food wherever it fits his program. But transportation can be a problem, as can finding the right product.

“It’s tough to find good supply and delivery. That’s what I find. Delivery is a big issue for me

because I can't devote one day a week to drive around and collect all the stuff. It makes it hard to do business," he said. "But I totally support this and buy locally wherever possible."

With 750 families, about 2,400 ski club members in all, and as many as 300 meals on a weekend night, he said he's looking for the best and will pay a bit more for the quality.

"I think it's important to support the local economy," Hagedorn said. "It's a healthier way to eat. The food is coming right out of the ground. It's not traveling hundreds of miles to get to us. It's tastier, It's generally organic. That's very important."

That's the thrust behind the so-called 100 mile diet local food movement which producers and buyers at this forum said is still gathering momentum.

Everything in Jackie Durnford's Creemore 100 Mile Store originates within 100 miles. Over four years, sales have grown steadily, she said.

"We're up year over year, so our sales are on the increase. It looks like it's going in the right direction. It doesn't look like it's declining," Durnford said. "I think there should be more events like this in small localized communities. This makes our lives easier."

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