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Eat at home is message of Prince Edward's Harvestin' the County plan

By Nelson Zandbergen
AgriNews Staff Writer

BLOOMFIELD — WITH ITS AGRICULTURAL REPUTATION, WELL-RESPECTED WINERIES AND STATUS AS A VACATION DESTINATION, PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY BOASTS A CULINARY CACHET THAT REACHES WELL BEYOND ITS BORDERS.

But it seems that folks who actually live in "The County" — as the place markets itself — aren't eating enough of the fresh food that grows in their own back yard.

So the County's newest promotional effort is aimed squarely at them, in a bid to reap better support for the surrounding agricultural industry at local checkout counters. "Harvestin' the County," a month-long campaign initiated by the municipality's economic development office, got under way in August.

"Essentially, our goal is to encourage more local people to eat more locally grown agricultural produce," explained Rebecca LeHeup-Bucknell, executive director of Taste the County, a not-for-profit "destination marketing" organization that is implementing the new, inwardly-directed campaign.

"It's not really focused on the tourist, to tell you the truth."

LeHeup-Bucknell says residents of Prince Edward County are no different than anyone else in requiring the occasional reminder about supporting local agriculture. "It's a North American issue. We're kind of convenience oriented ... It's easier to go into the grocery store and shop and

not think about where it's coming from."

Harvestin' the County aims to educate consumers about the source of the food they eat, with preference given to that grown in Prince Edward County, followed by Ontario as a whole, she said.

"If we can't support our own industry, we could lose it, and that would be a crying shame."

Residents participate in Harvestin' the County by pledging to spend a certain amount of money on local produce each week during August. It's called the "pledge of allegiance" on the campaign's slick new website, which reads: "With my commitment, I will support County farmers, reinvest money back into the community and eat the freshest and tastiest food around!"

Pledgers have the chance to win one of four prizes involving locally grown food and meals, valued up to \$250.

A new Harvestin' the County logo created by local artist Carl Wiens - featuring a stylistic antique tractor within a pastoral farmyard - plays prominently on campaign literature and the web site. And at two participating stores - a butcher shop and a grocery outlet - the logo is being used to identify Prince Edward County produce, according to LeHeup-Bucknell, who hopes to expand the number of retailers next year.

She says the campaign is as much about engaging people in their community and it is about appreciating the County's heritage and "culture of food."

The culmination comes Aug. 22, when Bloomfield's main street is shut down for Harvestin' the County Lunch. Running 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., the locally produced lunch (\$15 for adults, \$10 for children under 16) includes barbecue beef, vegetables, cider and more. "It's a really great meal."

When asked, she agreed the campaign might serve as a template for other agri-

cultural communities aiming to boost the consumption of local products.

She said that economic development officer Dan Taylor began looking at the idea a couple of years ago, after calculating the food consumption of 25,000 year-round residents in the County. At three meals a day, "that's 23 million meal occasions during the month of August. That's huge," she said.

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