

Local is bountiful at The Saskatoon Club

Report by Bruce Hill

Saskatchewan is full of expertise in production and business development. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate all those involved in agriculture and the media for recognizing local producers. We need you all.

Traditional agriculture has become huge. Individual farms have grown exponentially in size. Producers have major choices in new crops and inputs. The management of farms and their input costs is onerous. Saskatchewan's economy abounds with the fruits of extensive agriculture.

Most can envision the extensive production of cereals, pulses, oilseeds, and livestock. But there is another group emerging in the province. This group has been around for decades but today it is growing...growing fruits, vegetables, and specialized livestock in an "intensive" form of agriculture. Intensive in that it uses small acreages that have the potential to stand shoulder to shoulder with their extensive neighbours who today measure their farms in 10's of thousands of acres.

Several decades ago Saskatchewan was indeed the "breadbasket of the world". Huge volumes of high quality food were sent around the globe. Today's reality is that the export market is extremely competitive. Many markets struggle to afford the production that has become so dependent on a high cost of production and risk. Still today the expertise of producers has adopted their management skills to this risk management. And done so in a relatively short time that can be measured in years, not centuries.

Alongside this movement has developed a disconnect. Our forefathers (and mothers) knew where their food came from and how it was processed. They could look their neighbours in the eye as they purchased or bartered for their eggs, milk, and meat. Urban consumers have largely lost that connection. Children are growing up not having experienced having seen a cow milked, a calf born, a chicken slaughtered, or a plant harvested. They can only relate to seeing it on the supermarket shelves and storybooks.

There is a segment of producers that have opted to become suppliers of other portions on your dinner plate. They have chosen to intensively farm their land and produce some of the most exceptional foods available today. Foods that are safe and of an incredibly high quality.

Consumers are becoming more and more sophisticated. Their knowledge of their diet places enormous demands on a system that has unfolded to distribute highly processed fast food to a busy world. Vegetables from California or Mexico and lamb from Australia is the norm in our supermarkets. Consumers accept that. But they place demands on those distributors (and distributors on producers) to provide an uncompromising high quality safe product at a low cost.

In Saskatchewan there are a group of producers of extraordinary local food. Saskatchewan is blessed with vast tracts of high quality land. The environment here is viewed by much of the world as pristine. And the foods that are grown in this pristine environment are not compromised by man and his technologies to the extent of agricultural land in congested countries. Intensive farmers in these areas are producing some of the world's exceptional foods and it is being done by your neighbours.

Charlene and I had the opportunity to attend this year's Local Bounty held at The Saskatoon Club on March 8. Local Bounty is a chance for producers to meet with chefs and restaurateurs. Together they heard speakers that included Calgarian Chef Wade Sirois who described his dedication to serving up his customers with food from 40 producers around Calgary. You can see his weekly menu changes with production from his suppliers at www.foragefoods.com. Then attendees were treated to local foods artistically prepared by The Saskatoon Club's award winning Chef Anthony McCarthy. Keeping with the engaging philosophy of Local Bounty, Chef Anthony was assisted by student chefs Danielle Lehnert, Moran Keshany, and Sheldon Polowick. Local Bounty in Saskatoon is featured on www.localbounty.ca.

[Bruce Hill is currently the President of Canadian Cherry Producers Inc, a Saskatchewan Fruit Growers Association Director, a Executive and Finance Committee member for the Canadian Horticulture Council and sits on the Local Bounty, Sask InDemand, Organics Connections organizing committees. Bruce and Charlene grow raspberries and cherries at Imperial.]