



Thought for food

Food charter champions resilient food system

by Lee Ann Waterman

Our relationship to food is both simple and complex, says Joan Stonehocker, executive director of the York Region Food Network.

Food provides nourishment. It is woven into culture, celebration and community. But access to fresh healthy food can be complicated by issues such as poverty, geography and understanding of proper nutrition.

“Food is a big catalyst for starting conversations about healthy communities and good infrastructure,” Ms Stonehocker says.

Established in 1986, the York Region Food Network’s mandate is to raise awareness about hunger in York Region and advocate for more sustainable food options.

Its initiatives include community gardens, community kitchens and, recently, the creation of York Region Food Charter.

The charter’s vision is a resilient food system for York Region—and it identifies the actions needed to make that happen,

incorporating the following themes:

- health and well-being;
- economic opportunities;
- environmental sustainability;
- equity and social justice;
- education and skills; and
- culture and celebration.

“It’s a way to get people on board, to say, ‘We have the same vision, we have the same values and we want to make an effort to encourage the community to embrace these values,’” says Kate Greavette, food charter coordinator.

What would a community that fully embraces the food charter look like?

Everyone would have access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate food without the need to resort to emergency food sources. Residents would be educated about why to buy and where to find local food, as well as gardening, healthy cooking and composting. Economic development plans would encourage robust and financially viable

local agriculture; and agriculture practices would be environmentally sustainable.

There are challenges on all these fronts, Ms Greavette and Ms Stonehocker acknowledge, and no quick fixes.

According to a 2012 survey by the Ontario Association of Food Banks, nearly 413,000 Ontarians use emergency food programs every month, 160,000 of them children. Others are not getting the nutrients they need because of a lack of access to fresh nutritious food or lack of knowledge about healthy eating. And for a variety of reasons, farmers have a hard time making a living producing locally consumed produce and meat.

But the food charter is a starting point.

“We can use food and the food charter as a catalyst to bring people together, as an easy introduction to complex issues to get people engaged,” Ms Greavette says.

For a copy of the York Region Food Charter, visit yrfn.ca.



Get involved

The York Region Food Network's programs offer opportunities for accessing healthy food and for volunteering to help bring healthy food to those in need.

Community gardens

The York Region Food Network operates community gardens in Aurora, Newmarket and Markham.

Volunteers help with general maintenance. Seeds, plants, tools, wheelbarrows, sheds and other supplies are often donated or provided at cost by local businesses.

There is no charge to participate, but gardeners are asked to volunteer at least five hours a season and encouraged to donate some of their produce to a food bank or family in need.

Community kitchens

The food network partners with York Region Health Services to offer resources and advice for residents wanting to form community kitchens—groups of people who come together to prepare meals for their families.

Good food boxes

Open to any resident interested in healthy, affordable eating, the program offers boxes of fresh fruits and vegetables at locations across the region monthly. The boxes are pre-packed and content changes depending on the season and availability.

Participants must pre-order boxes; the cost is \$10 for a small box and \$15 for a large box.

Aquaponics

This sustainable food production system combines aquaculture (raising fish or seafood) and hydroponics (growing plants in water). The fish waste provides nutrients to the plants, which in turn

filter the water so it can be recirculated.

The food network has partnered with Toronto-based company Urban Produce, secured a grant from Ontario Centres for Excellence and found a site in Newmarket to launch this program. It hopes to have a system up and running this spring and plans to farm tilapia, a fish suited to living in close quarters at room temperature, and lettuce.

For more information on these programs, call the food network at 905-841-3101.

Fresh Food Partners gleaning program

Fresh Food Partners works with local farmers to help provide residents living on a limited income with fresh vegetables and fruit. Residents pick produce that would otherwise go to waste at the end of the harvest season at no cost.

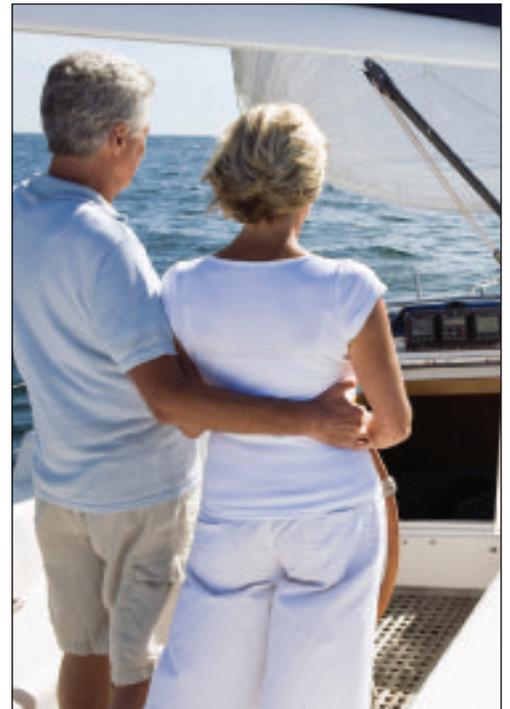
For more information, call York Region Health Services at 905-895-4512, ext. 4339.

Seeds for Change

The food network has partnered with Seeds For Change, a grass-roots community organization, to create healthier neighbourhoods through school and community gardens.

One of its goals is to see 2,015 new food gardens (in the community, at schools, in backyards, on balconies, etc.) created in York Region by 2015.

For more information or to register your new garden, visit seedsforchangesgardens.org or call 905-597-3316.



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