

Addendum

by Sandra Phinney



Chef Peter DiVeto, The Blue Door



Lil MacPherson



Dining In Dishing Out

Local ingredients make for
the tastiest flavours on trendy menus

It's confession time. I'm becoming obsessed with eating local foods (organic when possible, although I'm not fanatic on that score). So it shouldn't come as a surprise that in my travels, I seek out restaurants that feature local products on their menu.

Mercifully, they are getting easier to find, so that says something about restaurant trends in general and buying local in particular. Recently, I had dinner at the Blue Door restaurant and bar in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Chris and Debbie Black opened the restaurant seven years ago. They offer contemporary global cuisine in a funky setting replete with local art. But the best feature of the Blue Door is that the owners are committed to the 100-mile menu philosophy (working with ingredients sourced within 100 miles of the restaurant).

Currently, over 60 per cent of the primary ingredients for their dinner entrees come from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, including Cedar Lake Farm (organically raised Berkshire pork), Kuinshoeve Farms (beef and sausage), New Brabant Barn (wild boar), Gagetown Fruit Farm (produce), and Maison Beausoleil (oysters).

Chris Black used to joke that you could get a better selection of fresh Atlantic seafood in Saskatoon than you could here. "When we started, I could not get fresh Atlantic tuna to save my life. We were getting frozen grey pucks of tuna imported from God knows where. Now we have fresh tuna, arctic char, halibut, cod, lobster, scallops and mussels—depending on the season."

Based on guest feedback and requests, they recently launched a New Brunswick cheese plate and it was an instant success. "Buying local makes great sense from a business perspective as well as an ethics perspective. We have local farmers that we support who in turn promote Blue Door at the markets where they sell their produce," says the culinary guru. "Obviously, if your customer base responds positively to fresh and local, then it makes sense to provide what the customer wants," Black adds.

Another leader in the restaurant pack is Lil MacPherson. When Hurricane Juan came slamming through Nova Scotia back in '03, everyone was pre-occupied with loosing their power. Not so for MacPherson. Her primary concern was feeding herself. "Eighty-five per cent of our food comes from away. If we got cut off from the rest of the world, the grocery stores shelves would be empty in three days," she says.

This prompted her to be part of the solution. Six months after the hurricane, MacPherson opened The Wooden Monkey in downtown Halifax. Her aim was to buy local and help create a sustainable community. She points out that most restaurants have about three suppliers whereas The Wooden Monkey has around 40 local producers who bring in a variety of products. "It's very challenging but worth it. When you see a farmer come in with his son or daughter and see that we are helping support his family—and keeping our hard earned money in our own community—there is no better reward," she says. "We have some very talented farmers who can take care of us if we choose to give them a chance."

MacPherson still runs into people who are confused about words like 'healthy organic foods'. "They think we're a bunch of hippies, eating alpha sprouts and singing Kumbayah. *Not!*" While she doesn't much care what people think, she does believe that going green is a smart business move. "It's the fastest growing sector of the economy and it is predicted that it will grow faster than any other." She also believes that the public is looking for good quality food and that The Wooden Monkey thrives because they care about the local food system and their customer's health.

Her advice to wanna-be restaurateurs? "Get your vision down on paper. Start a business with good values, respect for people and the planet and you will be on your way. And surround yourself with people who know more than you do."

Word clearly gets around. When the Rolling Stones were in town in 2006, guitarist Ronnie Wood went there to eat. MacPherson not only received a personal invitation to the concert, but she also got to see his organic underwear. "It's something I will never forget." Nor will her customers.

P.S.: Dear reader, if you can recommend Atlantic Canadian restaurants that dish out local food, please let me know. I spend a lot of time roaming around the region and I'd like to expand my list.