

Thought for Food

(as it appeared in the Creston Valley Advance newspaper, May 1, 2008)

Local Diet Nourishes Local Economy

Gail Southall

Did you hear the one about the farmer who won a million dollars? When asked what he was going to do with his newfound wealth, he scratched his head and said, "Well, I guess I'll just keep on farming until it's all gone."

That might be funny if it weren't true. The most recent Canadian census revealed that only 80% of farms reported in 2001 were still in operation in 2006 and that small farm income had declined. In 2006 the average annual gross farm receipts for Creston valley farmers were less than \$60,000. In 1940 Canadian farmers retained in net income about 50 cents of every dollar they generated. Today they retain about a dime.

Since 1940 farm industrialization has increased yield, but it has also increased the need for expensive equipment, fuel, fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides, processing, packaging and transportation, not to mention more land to hopefully make the thing pay... at the expense of the farmer. Would that have been sustainable if Canadians diligently supported their farmers and ensured that grocery store shelves were stocked with local products and that ingredients that went into prepared foods were locally sourced? Perhaps. But instead, our culture embarked on a zealous quest for a year round, dizzying array of fruits and vegetables, fueled by an insatiable appetite for food that's cheaper than the dirt it's grown in. Farming became just another business, and food just another commodity. So today we have a national food system where 80% of what we eat is imported and 40% of what we grow is exported; a system that teeters on the brink of insecurity. Have we created a community where fruit literally drips off the trees while we run to the grocery store to buy foreign produce? Have we created a community where farmers desperately seek new opportunities to keep themselves afloat while we criticize them for the price of onions? Have we created a community that has forgotten the necessity of a stable food supply?

Each dollar spent on locally-grown food creates a positive ripple in the local economy and gives those with local open space – farms, orchards and pastures – an economic reason to stay open and undeveloped. Does each New Zealand apple, California strawberry, or Chinese bulb of garlic we purchase give local farmers an economic reason to rip out their orchards and offer their land to developers, to grow biofuels instead of food, or to sell water instead of potatoes?

Can we in this valley consume all that is grown here and support local farmers one hundred percent? Not likely. Can local farmers produce all that we need to eat? Maybe not. But I'll bet we could develop both the appetite and know-how to better feed ourselves and our farmers if we became better acquainted with our food and our local growers. And I'll bet if we made an effort to eat and share as much local produce as possible for one or two months this summer, we'd not only be happier and healthier, our community would be too.

Creston valley food sources can be found in the Farm Fresh Guide, available at www.crestonfarmfresh.ca. (Asparagus season is just around the corner!)

Gail Southall is Coordinator for the Creston Valley Food Action Coalition, a non-profit organization dedicated to all aspects of the creation, distribution and consumption of sustainable, healthy, local agricultural products. For more information on the Food Action Coalition call 254-0254 or email cvfoodaction@gmail.com.