

Series 1

Local Food Champions: Faces Behind our Food

Building on previous research on local food procurement, this series is celebrating local food champions and their commitment to supporting Ontario's agri-food sector.



Profiling:
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Nick Benninger



As Culinary Director at the Five Diamond designated “Bruce Hotel” in Stratford, Ontario, Nick Benninger has been pivotal in creating an authentic, cultural experience for customers using the freshest local ingredients combined with storytelling to create an unforgettable moment for hotel guests. With over 25 years of experience in the hospitality industry and 15 years as an independent business owner, Nick continues to develop like a fine wine, offering complexity and improving over time. “I have an opportunity to do all of the things that I’ve been doing in my career up until now. There couldn’t be a better platform” says Benninger.

As a young, self-admitted, picky eater, Benninger recounts a valuable teaching moment when he arrived home for dinner only to realize that his mother was cooking fish. His statement of displeasure was met with a challenge to cook for himself. He subsequently joined the rest of the family at the table with his hotdog. What you eat is equally important to with whom you share your meal.

Benninger started connecting with local food when working as a chef at a fine dining restaurant in Stoney Creek, where ingredients were imported from all over the world because there was an underlying belief that imported products were superior. Considering the location was adjacent to Niagara Region, known for its tender fruit, grapes and greenhouse production, this philosophy simply didn’t make sense to Benninger. He was driven to prove that local Ontario ingredients should be showcased on any restaurant menu and that story needed to be told.



***Cultivating relationships
with farmers allowed Nick
to better understand the
seasonality of food in
Ontario and how to support
farmers directly.***

In the early 2000s, Kitchener-Waterloo had not yet been established as a food scene. It became the perfect backdrop for Benninger to establish his own identity as a chef, showcasing local food. The area was surrounded by farm operations located on productive, fertile land growing, a multitude of fresh fruits and vegetables, along with diverse livestock operations. Many of these products were sold at the St. Jacobs Farmers Market, known to be largest year-round indoor-outdoor farmers market in Canada. “Half of the people come here to attend the country’s most famous farmers market and we’re not serving food from here?. We have a story to tell” stated Benninger. As a natural extension, he started showcasing dishes made from fresh, local, seasonal ingredients on all of his menu’s, while storytelling so that customers could appreciate and learn about their culinary experience.

Over the next 15 years, Benninger made a name for himself and built a culinary powerhouse from the ground up with Nick & Nat’s Uptown 21, Taco Farm, The Butcher and Market and The Charcuterie Bar. “Nick & Nat’s Uptown 21” was recognized in “Where to eat in Canada” while Taco Farm was featured in the Food Networks “You Gotta Eat Here!”. Regardless of the type of cuisine or establishment, Benninger was passionate that local food should be the key underpinning of all of their operations. In 2017, Benninger established and embedded Fat Sparrow Group into the Waterloo Region hospitality industry. The group grew to a team of over 200 employees working across 13 locations. At the same time, Nick cultivated relationships with farmers, leading to a better understanding of how he could best work with them, seasonal availability and greater insight about their lives.

In 2017, the opportunity to take storytelling to a new level came about from the unlikely pairing of chef and successful restaurateur Benninger and local film maker Taylor Jackson with “Nick and Taylor Make a Food Show”. The series, available on YouTube, raised the profile of businesses by highlighting some of the hidden culinary treasures in Kitchener Waterloo’s food scene. Through storytelling, the series brought food and community together, a core value established early in Benninger’s life.



"As anyone that cooks and welcomes people into their kitchen, we're trying to tell a story with the food we put on a plate and it's really enriched by our connection to what's happening around us."

Benninger was approached in 2022, to host "Farm to Fork", a new food and lifestyle television series available on Bell Fibe. Benninger's charm, humour and inquisitive nature provides insight to a number of local farm businesses and the agricultural challenges faced including investment, succession, innovation and labour. There is also a level of authenticity, as farm owners share their trials and tribulations. While the episodes visit some traditional farms, they also feature innovative operations such as Mountainoak Cheese, Ontario's first high-quality gouda cheese, Wisahkotewinowak, an urban Indigenous garden collective, Appleflats, a farm that is reintroducing crab apples which were quickly disappearing from the Ontario landscape, and Willibald Distillery, an on-farm distillery and brewery. The episodes feature Benninger showcasing local ingredients while cooking these over an open cinder block fire. Proof that fresh, seasonal ingredients can shine regardless of cooking techniques used. Episodes can be viewed at farmtoforktv.ca.

Stories have evolved and extended well beyond local food ingredients to the farmers that have invested their time, money, and creativity. Real people on the land and in the kitchens of this country create a tapestry that highlights a unique taste of place, deepened by the understanding of how these products have originated. Today, Benninger continues this approach by ensuring Bruce Hotel ("the Bruce") staff understand the stories behind the food. In fact, staff get the opportunity to visit local farms so they can have first-hand knowledge of the origins of their ingredients. On the Bruce menu, Chicken for Edna, a dish inspired by Waterloo cookbook author Edna Staebler (Food that Really Schmecks) continues to be a popular seller and provides the opportunity to dialogue with customers about this early local food hero.

Guests at the Bruce can even take their food experience to the next level, "We take guests through luxury coach service to a few farms in the area and show them around giving them culinary treats as we go", explains Benninger. Future plans include the development of a culinary garden in a 3-acre area behind the hotel to accompany existing bee hives. Benninger has been working with a local nursery to obtain Indigenous fruits, vegetables and nut trees and a nearby high school has become involved in their planting.

"In a few years, we will be picking pawpaws, apples, cattails, horseradish, serviceberries and all sorts of fun things. I want to continue to build off this opportunity, to be a place that you will never forget. We translated the landscape onto a plate. You are left with these lifelong memories of a thing that can never be repeated anywhere else because it's unique to this place."

There is no doubt that Benninger is a story teller and he continues to share his knowledge and inspire those he feeds and the staff in his kitchens. The next chapter promises to be just as exciting!

