

LOCAL FOOD CHAMPIONS

SERIES 7



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

FACES BEHIND OUR FOOD

**PROFILING:
MARK KENNY
UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH**

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School of Environmental
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LOCAL FOOD CHAMPION

MARK KENNY - UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

PROCUREMENT WITH PURPOSE

For Mark Kenny, supporting local food is more than a professional responsibility—it's a commitment to strengthening Ontario's food system from the ground up. As Senior Manager of Procurement, Planning, and Operations with Hospitality Services at the University of Guelph, Kenny has spent years championing the purchase of Ontario-grown and Ontario-made foods, helping connect local farmers, food businesses and community with one of Canada's largest institutional dining operations.

Through his leadership, strategic partnerships, and dedication to sustainable procurement, he has demonstrated that every purchasing decision can have a lasting impact on local agriculture, rural economies, and the communities they serve. Mark's unwavering commitment to making local food a priority has earned him recognition as the latest Local Food Champion, inspiring others to see how institutional buying power can help build a stronger, more resilient food system.

For Kenny, procurement is about much more than purchasing food—it's about building a resilient local food system through informed decision-making and meaningful relationships. With over two decades in procurement, he has seen the profession evolve into a strategic leadership role that requires education, adaptability, and a commitment to continuous learning. He encourages aspiring procurement professionals to pursue formal education and certification (there are two procurement designations in Canada), noting that very few people in Canadian post-secondary food service hold professional procurement designations. More importantly, he believes procurement professionals have the power to connect local producers with institutional buyers and create lasting opportunities for Ontario agriculture. "If you're passionate enough about it, you'll spend the extra hours to do the extra work to make things happen." That passion has enabled Kenny to help local companies navigate complex distribution channels, opening doors to campuses across the country while demonstrating that procurement can be a catalyst for local food success.



"Every day is different, it's one of the best professions because you're always solving problems."

-Mark Kenny, Senior Manager of Procurement, Planning, and Operations with Hospitality Services, University of Guelph

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TELLING THE STORY BEHIND THE FOOD

While sourcing local food is essential, Kenny believes telling its story is equally important. Through the University of Guelph's centralized production and distribution model, Hospitality Services prepares many menu items in-house before distributing them across campus, creating efficiencies while maintaining quality and consistency. But for Kenny, operational excellence must be paired with effective storytelling. "Our team of chefs and staff do so much," he says. "The challenge is how do you tell that story in the right way?" Whether through digital displays in dining halls, engaging social media content, videos, campus publications, or media interviews, he believes students and parents want to understand where their food comes from and who produced it.

Hospitality Services also works closely with the University's recruitment team, showcasing its commitment to local food as part of the student experience. "When you're recruiting students, you have to tell all the stories across campus," Kenny explains. "Food, atmosphere, student life—they're all part of why students choose the University of Guelph." Authentic storytelling, supported by strong branding and genuine experiences, has become one of Hospitality Services' most effective recruitment tools. According to Macleans magazine ranking, for the last 20 years, the University of Guelph has maintained its number one position for the best campus food in Canada. This score is determined through a comprehensive Student Satisfaction Survey where the University of Guelph routinely scores 94 percent or higher satisfaction rate from students regarding food taste and variety.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE FOOD INDUSTRY



"A big part of procurement is being able to connect people in the supply chain because not everybody has those connections," he says. Industry events allow him to discover innovative products, meet emerging food entrepreneurs, and introduce promising Ontario companies to campus food service leaders across Canada. "I can meet 100 people in three days at a trade show—it would take me a year to do that one meeting at a time." His extensive network has helped local businesses gain access to new institutional markets while strengthening collaboration across the post-secondary food service sector.

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For Kenny, networking isn't simply about expanding contacts; it's about creating opportunities that allow local food businesses, farmers, processors, and institutions to grow together. He has consistently taken networking a step further by turning relationships into collaborative initiatives that showcase the people behind Canada's food system. One such example, is "Cooking by Degrees", a project Kenny developed in partnership with Owen Roberts, Research Communications Director at the University of Guelph and past president of the International Federation of Agricultural Journalists. Together, they profiled 17 of Canada's leading college and university chefs from CCUFSA, paired each chef with the farmers who grow the ingredients they use, and shared student-favourite recipes that can be recreated at home. The project demonstrates how collaboration and storytelling can connect producers, chefs, institutions, and consumers, strengthening an appreciation for local food while building lasting relationships across Canada's food system. More information about this project can be found at <https://cookingbydegrees.ca>.

LOOKING AHEAD

"If you understand the process it takes to grow food, I think you respect it a little more." That philosophy has guided every stage of his career—from procurement and partnerships to education and storytelling. Through his vision, leadership, and unwavering commitment to Ontario's food system, Kenny has shown that supporting local food is about much more than what's on the plate. It's about investing in people, communities, and a more sustainable future—qualities that make him a truly deserving Local Food Champion.

