LOCAL FOOD CHAMPIONS

SERIES 9



FACES BEHIND OUR FOOD

PROFILING:
MIKE ECKER
VINELAND GROWERS

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

Created by
Anna DeMarchi-Meyers and
Dr. Sara Epp

Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance

Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance

UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH | School of Environmental Design and Rural Development
Ontario Agricultural College

LOCAL FOOD CHAMPION

MIKE ECKER - VINELAND GROWERS

GROWING TOGETHER: THE COOPERATIVE POWER

What does it take to keep Ontario fruit on Canadian tables for more than a century? For Mike Ecker, President of Vineland Growers, the answer is simple: farmers working together.

In an agricultural landscape where rising costs, limited farmland, climate pressures and competition from imported food can make farming increasingly challenging, Vineland Growers offers a powerful example of what cooperation can accomplish. Ecker is helping lead one of Canada's longest-standing agricultural cooperatives while keeping its original purpose firmly in view: bringing farmers together to strengthen their ability to grow, market and sell food. For Ecker, local food is not simply about where food is grown—it is about creating a system that allows farmers to remain on the land and continue supplying Canadians for generations.



"Our business is built on 100% supplying Canadians with food. We don't export." -Mike Ecker

MORE THAN 100 YEARS OF FARMERS WORKING TOGETHER

Vineland Growers was established in 1913 by four farmers who recognized that working together could give them advantages they could not achieve individually. By pooling their purchasing power and working collectively to market their products, farmers could reduce costs, improve their access to markets and create greater stability for their businesses.

Today, Vineland Growers has close to 200 members, approximately 5,000 acres and nearly one million trees. Its growers produce an impressive range of Ontario fruit, with peaches, plums and nectarines forming the foundation of its tender fruit business. The cooperative also handles pears, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, table grapes and apples, including new apple growers who have joined from Norfolk County.

That commitment is increasingly important as agricultural land in the Niagara Peninsula becomes harder to find. There are only so many acres available for orchards, while urban development and infrastructure continue to put pressure on agricultural land. The cooperative model offers an important form of continuity. When one farm family leaves agriculture, another can join, while the cooperative remains in place. As Ecker explains, "If the president of the co-op leaves, or one member leaves, or another member leaves, the co-op's still always there."

LOCAL FOOD CHAMPIONS

MIKE ECKER - VINELAND GROWERS

THE POWER OF BUYING AND SELLING TOGETHER

The cooperative model is about much more than marketing fruit. Vineland Growers provides its members with access to inputs and services that would be difficult for an individual grower to secure at the same scale. Through its collective purchasing power, the cooperative buys fertilizer, crop protection products, posts, wire and containers.

The same collective strength applies to marketing. Vineland Growers works directly with major Canadian grocery retailers, helping farmers access markets without wholesalers standing between the grower and the retailer. The cooperative coordinates volumes, distribution and retail promotions, which is particularly important for highly perishable crops with short harvest windows. During the peach season, the cooperative can be moving more than a million baskets a week across the country. “It takes a team to distribute and market and sell on behalf of the growers,” says Ecker.

The cooperative also provides a mechanism for reinvesting in the future. After operating costs are covered, the board can choose to invest surplus funds back into the business—for example, by building additional cold storage—or return funds to growers through patronage. In this way, the cooperative's success is tied directly to the farmers who own it.

FINDING NEW GROUND FOR ONTARIO FRUIT



With limited room to expand in the Niagara Peninsula, Vineland Growers is looking beyond its traditional growing area. Norfolk County has become an important part of that strategy, particularly for apples and pears.

The opportunity is significant. Much of the pear supply consumed in Canada is imported, creating an opportunity for Ontario growers to replace imports with locally grown fruit. “All we’re going to do is take away the imports,” Ecker says.

The expansion also demonstrates the flexibility of the cooperative model. Rather than being restricted to a single geographic area, Vineland Growers can connect farmers in different regions with markets, infrastructure and expertise. Investments in new varieties are helping growers extend harvest windows and make better use of the land already available.

LOCAL FOOD CHAMPIONS

MIKE ECKER - VINELAND GROWERS

A COOPERATIVE MODEL FOR THE FUTURE

After more than a century, Vineland Growers offers a compelling lesson: sometimes the best way for farmers to compete is not to compete alone. By sharing purchasing power, marketing expertise, infrastructure and resources, individual farms can retain their independence while gaining the advantages of operating as part of something much larger.

The model has also proven resilient through changing markets, weather extremes and generations of farm succession. And it is not unique to fruit. Ecker points to successful cooperative models elsewhere in Canada, including the large dairy cooperatives in Quebec, as evidence that farmers in other sectors can benefit from working collectively.



For Mike, the future of Vineland Growers is about continuing to adapt while staying true to the cooperative's original purpose. "As long as the Greenbelt's there, we've got to grow food. People always have to eat." That simple philosophy captures why Ecker and Vineland Growers are local food champions: they are not simply growing fruit. They are building the relationships, infrastructure and cooperative strength needed to keep Ontario farmers growing food for Canadians —today, tomorrow and for generations to come.

UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH | School of Environmental Design and Rural Development, Ontario Agricultural College

Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance

Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance