Farmers head downtown with a message of thanks

Commuters at Union Station were greeted by farm leaders handing out local food snacks to mark Agriculture Week

BY LILIAN SCHAER
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Toronto - Connecting farmers and consumers is at the core of Farm & Food Care Ontario's public outreach activities. Many of their events, like the highly popular Breakfast on the Farm or their long-running food influencer tours for media, dietitians and other food professionals, focus on bringing people to the farm.

During Ontario Agriculture Week, though, the shoe was on the other foot and Ontario farmers went to downtown Toronto to meet consumers and hand out Ontario food products.

According to Farm & Food Care Ontario Executive Director Kelly Daynard, the idea evolved from a Foodland Ontario-hosted event in Toronto's Yonge-Dundas Square during Local Food Week in June 2017 where people from the surrounding office towers attended a pop-up picnic of local food.

"During that event, a lady came up to me and asked if there were any real farmers there. I pointed out a few and she went off to meet them – she had never met an Ontario farmer before," said Daynard. "Toronto is a big target audience for us."

The Union Station event kicked off with farmers and staff from Farm & Food Care, Ontario Pork, Egg Farmers of Ontario, Dairy Farmers of Ontario and Grain Farmers of Ontario handing out breakfast sandwiches to commuters coming off the GO Train between 7 and 8:30 am.

Every sandwich was labelled with a "Thank you from Ontario's farmers" stickers and the #loveontfood hashtag, in hopes consumers would post about the event on social media and tell their friends – which they did.

"It was such a neat moment with commuters coming off the train telling us they got texts from friends saying don't buy breakfast, farmers are here handing out food," said Daynard, adding all farmers at the event were identified with a 'Proud Ontario Farmer' button specifying what they produce.

"We weren't asking for anything, we were just thanking consumers for buying local."

And although that was originally intended to be the extent of the event, more commodity organizations approached Farm & Food Care during the planning process with interest in participating, so a second wave of product giveaways took place in the afternoon from 3:45 to 5 pm.

Beef Farmers of Ontario sent people home with beef pepperettes, Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers handed out small containers of grape tomatoes, and Ontario Apple Growers had packaged apple slices on hand.

Local food displays were set up all day that were staffed with people handing out recipes and answering consumer questions about food and farming.

Egg farmer Dianne McComb who farms in the Lucan area was part of the team of volunteer farmers at Union Station during the breakfast shift. The opportunity to connect directly with consumers was her motivation to take part in the event – it's key to let Ontarians know their food is produced by a farmer and that it's fresh, local and good, she believes.

One of her most memorable moments of the day involved a conversation with a consumer passing through who had just bought four hens for his urban backyard, and their common interest in egg production, albeit on different scales.

"Having 25,000 layers is a bit different than four hens in a backyard, but he is interested in healthy food for his family and I have that interest too as a third generation egg farmer," McComb said. "I was able to share some information about nutrition and housing with him for small flocks - every step in farming is important."

"Trying to make those connections with consumers is so important and Farm & Food Care is a really good organization to promote those connections," she added.

Ontario Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Ernie Hardeman and his parliamentary assistant Randy Pettapiece helped hand out breakfast sandwiches in the morning.

Over the course of the day, volunteers distributed about 10,000 local food snacks to morning and evening commuters as well as Leaf fans streaming into the city for the hockey club's home opener.

Other organizations that weren't involved in supporting the day financially sent volunteers to help out, including Veal Farmers of Ontario, Ontario Federation of Agriculture, Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario, Ontario Processing Vegetable Growers and Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association.

According to Daynard, discussions are already underway for a similar event in Toronto next year, potentially targeting Local Food Week in June.

"I think it was a great day; we answered questions on everything from crop rotation and bee health to animal welfare," she said.

"This is our target audience. Commuters don't have very many opportunities to meet real farmers and we were well received there."

Ontario Federation of Agriculture president Keith Currie, left, and Ontario Apple Growers chair Charles Stevens, right, were two of the farmers on hand at Union Station to answer consumer questions about food and farming and help distribute local food snacks.

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