

Urban influencers learn about migrant worker programs

Tour brings GTA foodies together for lunch with migrant farm workers in Norfolk

BY LILIAN SCHAER
Ontario Farmer

A group of just under 40 Greater Toronto area food influencers – writers, bloggers, recipe developers and other food professionals – had a chance to spend a day visiting Norfolk County fruit and vegetable farms recently.

The goal of the tour, organized by Farm & Food Care Ontario and supported by the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association (OFVGA) and Ontario Apple Growers, was for participants to learn more about seasonal farm workers in Ontario.

"It is really important for our



Toronto area food influencers travelled to Norfolk County in early September to learn more about international farm workers on Ontario farms and the important role they play in the province's fruit and vegetable sector.

sector to be speaking up about the important role international workers play on our farms and in growing many of the fruits and vegetables Canadians love," said OFVGA Executive Director Alison Robertson.

"There is a lot of misinformation out there about international worker programs in

horticulture, and our goal is to address misconceptions and prejudices, and make sure that there are sources of credible information available for people who want to know more about workers, their lives here and at home, and why they come to Canada," she added.

The tour complemented

other outreach activities by OFVGA's More than a Migrant Worker project, which has been actively – and proactively – collecting and sharing the stories of migrant farm workers from across Ontario on social media and in more traditional media like the National Post and the Toronto Star.

A quick verbal survey of tour participants at the start of day revealed that although many had recently heard or read negative stories in the media about migrant farm workers in this province, only a couple had been exposed to positive information on the subject.

While travelling by bus to Norfolk County, Stefan Larrass, OFVGA's senior policy advisor on the labour file, spoke to participants about the two main employment programs for international farm workers in Ontario – Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and the agriculture stream of the Temporary Foreign Worker program (TFWP).

This was followed by a lengthy question and answer session where Larrass answered questions on everything from what countries workers come from and how much they earn to who pays for their food and how many undocumented migrant farm workers might be in Ontario.

The comments the food influencers left with tour organizers at the end of the day indicated the tour had made a difference in their perceptions of seasonal workers and how they view Ontario farmers who employ an international workforce:

"I feel more knowledgeable about the tightly regulated labour laws that support foreign workers," noted one participant.

"I've learned so much about seasonal foreign workers, their impact on our food supply, how our food is grown, and overall, just want to buy local produce from now on," shared another.

The first stop of the day was Strawberry Tyme Farms, a large raspberry and strawberry grower near Simcoe. John Cooper and his son Dalton described the evolution of the family's farm, the ups and downs of being in the berry business, and how they've transitioned their strawberry production from the field to tables in tunnels.

From there, the group went to Suncrest Orchards, owned by Amanda and Hayden Dooney, and enjoyed a Caribbean-themed lunch in the orchard with 17 seasonal agricultural workers from Jamaica. Many lively conversations sprang up between the tour participants and the workers, who had the chance to get to know each other in an informal setting.

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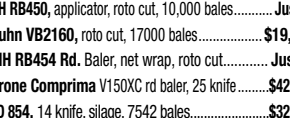
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