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Culinary Road Trip

A treasure hunt for the true tastes of Prince Edward County

By Shawna Wagman

WHO KNEW IT WAS POSSIBLE to experience an unconscious craving for food I'd never even tasted? It would happen every time I travelled down the 401 on a trip to Toronto. Like the scent of freshly baked bread that seeps out from the neighbour's window, the stories about Prince Edward County and its ever growing crop of top-notch eateries wafted beneath my nose and made me salivate. I'd heard the tales of the big-city foodies who had migrated to the region to enjoy both the simpler life and the abundance of superb locally grown and raised ingredients, many of them featured along the self-guided Taste Trail tour. By all accounts, the County, as it's known, is in the midst of a renaissance—a full-scale food and wine revival.

The energy behind the burgeoning movement has been fuelled by an eclectic group of so-called new settlers who are helping to cultivate a vibrant local food scene (a practical pairing for Canada's newest wine region) by nurturing a variety of food businesses and bringing dormant farmland back into production. It's not unusual for these County residents to describe their experiences in similar terms—of arriving as visitors but promptly falling under the County's spell and deciding to pull up stakes and move here. Many of



Jam-packed: What started off as a sideline selling a few jars of jam off her picnic table has morphed into a full-time year-round home-production business. Last year Pat York (top) sold 7,300 jars of jams, marmalades, chutneys, pickles, and relishes with such delectable sounding names as Columbia Blue Raspberry and Jewel Jam

them were chefs, farmers, café owners, caterers, bakers, and ice-cream makers before they moved to the County, and food remains the focus in their new Prince Edward County lives.

Regardless of what has brought food people to the County, I find in my travels a passionate commitment to local agriculture, a community-minded spirit, and a respect for food as the centre of life. It's a combination that quickly convinces me that this is an area ready for its culinary close-up. While some local flavours were limited during my most recent late-winter visit, I still found plenty of homegrown specialties to bring back to Ottawa in the soon-to-be-overflowing cooler stashed in my trunk. As a result of my successful mission, I offer up this delicious don't-miss list as a starting point for your next visit to the County.



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Take a stand: Passionate farmer Vicki Emlaw, who showcases heirloom and organic vegetables at her thriving roadside stall, also sells homemade pestos, sauces, and pickled preserves

Pat's Jams

"This was not a plan, it was just a hobby," says 70-year-old Pat York, who seems just a little bemused by the success of her homemade-jam business. What began as an escape from renovation work (York got out of the house to sell a few jars off her picnic table) has morphed into a full-time year-round home-production business—York sold 7,300 jars last year—featuring jams, marmalades, chutneys, pickles, and relishes. In the same way the vegetables grown down the road by her niece Vicki (see Vicki's Veggies) remind people of the way tomatoes used to taste, York's jams tap into our desire for simple food made the old-fashioned way. Ironically, choosing from among the 130 different varieties can be as overwhelming as standing in the supermarket aisle. Some favourites include Columbia Blue Raspberry, made from an increasingly rare local fruit, and Jewel Jam, a brightly balanced combination of sour cherries, gooseberries, redcurrants, and red raspberries. Pat's Jams, 113 Morrison Point Rd., R.R.2, Milford, 613-476-6929, www.pec.on.ca/patsjams.



Her family farm is home to a cornucopia of crops, many of which live on all year in the form of beautiful jewel-toned jars of homemade pestos, sauces, and pickled preserves. Beginning in June, visitors can stop by and select from whatever has been recently picked. The farm boasts a local following of weekly subscribers, but for everyone else, sale works on the honour system. That's right, take what you like and leave the cash in a can. Emlaw hosts an annual heirloom seedling sale in the spring, as well as her Heirloom Hurrah on Labour Day with samples and sales of 100-plus varieties of rare and unusual heirloom tomatoes. Vicki's Veggies, 81 Morrison Point Rd., Black River, 613-476-7241, vickisveggies.com.

Vicki's Veggies

Equal parts educator, activist, and passionate farmer, Vicki Emlaw runs a thriving roadside stand that is celebrated by local foodies for its stunning variety of organic and heirloom vegetables.

Doughnuts at Schroedter's Market

Wander into the old-school country store, and you're likely to find a fresh batch of homemade doughnuts churning out of the tireless 20-year-old doughnut machine on the kitchen counter. During peak season, long line-ups



form for the chance to taste the still warm cinnamon-sugar-dredged cakes. Remarkably light and fluffy with perfectly crisp edges, the palm-size rings have restored my faith in doughnuts. Husband-and-wife proprietors Fred and Suzanne Schroedter took over this roadside general store in 2000 and have transformed it into a down-home food emporium that features homemade soups and sandwiches stacked high with farm-fresh ingredients. The recently expanded on-site bakery is responsible for everything from classic fruit pies to gluten-free muffins and pizza crusts. "Except for laying the eggs and churning the butter, we make everything ourselves," says Suzanne. Schroedter's Farm Market, 1492 Hwy 62 South, R.R.1, Bloomfield, 613-393-2823, www.schroedtersmarket.com.

Black River Cheese Company 5-Year-Old Cheddar

This remarkably resilient cheese company has been waiting patiently for 107 years for its neighbours to start producing the wine required to put together the ultimate County cocktail party. The farmer-owned co-operative, created in 1901, has survived while 29 other local cheese factories have closed over the years. It even managed to rebuild and prosper after a devastating fire seven years ago. Today the local landmark continues to produce top-notch, naturally aged cheddars. I'm told there's quite a following for their fresh-garlic cheese curds, but I'll stick



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County Crackers

When pastry chef and self-proclaimed snacker Marianne Sanders tried to imagine the ultimate biscuit, she wanted it to have elements of every cracker, cookie, and oatcake she had ever loved. It had to be both slightly sweet and slightly salty so that it could be paired equally well with a cup of tea or a plate of cheese. Using mostly organic ingredients, Sanders now makes these little snacks in two addictive flavours: toasted oatmeal and rosemary-and-currant oatmeal. "They are a huge amount of work," she says. "I roll them out, stamp every cookie, and dock it with a fork so they look like big buttons." The fuzzy black-and-white family portrait that adorns her packaging pays homage to her grandmother and namesake, who fed the Bloomfield community during the Depression. County Crackers (613-476-1098) are available at Pinch Gourmet and Black River Cheese Co.



Honey Pie Hives and Herbals

Bay Woodyard keeps bees, grows herbs, and gathers wildflowers on her 69-acre property outside of Picton. Inspired by nature's ability to nurture, she has created a line of bath and body products, many of which look and sound good enough to eat. There's pumpkin-pie soap and rosemary-ginger shampoo, as well as lip balms in apple pie, chai, and chocolate mint. Fortunately she offers

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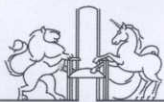
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Cold comfort: Slickers ice creams are made using fruits picked at neighbouring farms. One of their most popular flavours features whole freshly baked apple pies crumbled into vanilla ice cream

a few implicitly edible items as well. The lemon-pepper herb blend adds a fresh, citrusy zing to salads, veggies, and fish, while Blues Tea, with its dried buds of sunny chamomile, borage, St. John's wort, thyme, and mint, promises "to lighten the heavy heart." Thanks to Woodward's whimsical hand-drawn illustrations, the same might be said of all her creations. Honey Pie products (613-476-3216) are available in a variety of shops as well as on-line at www.honeypie.ca.



Stone House Farm eggs

Five years ago Geri and John Della Bosca were enjoying retirement by sailing around the Bahamas when they befriended a couple from Prince Edward County. Today their 11-acre farm across from Big Island on the Bay of Quinte has a reputation for producing some of the tastiest, freshest, and largest free-range eggs in the

region—not to mention a wide variety of organically grown vegetables, herbs, and berries. When asked how a former financial planner and a hairdresser from Sudbury, Ontario, came to be County farmers, John's answer is philosophical. "The farm presented itself, and we immediately fell in love with it. It seemed to be saying, 'Look after me and I'll look after you.'" Visitors to their Old Pig Barn Farm Store are welcome to peek in on the hens next door before buying their golden-yolked eggs. "People want to know that the chickens have a good life," says Geri. "They're happy birds. They listen to CBC Radio2." Stone House Farm, 1047 County Rd. 15, R.R.2, Picton, 613-471-1234, www.stonehousefarm.ca.

The Marshmallow Room's four-day shallot confiture

There is a saying that good things come to those who wait. In the hands of chef Scott Kapitan and his wife, pastry chef Jacqui Vickers, time transforms the humble shallot into a seductively sweet, spicy, and almost boozy preserve. With four days to develop its character, this unique product begs to be paired with local cheeses and charcuterie. This is just one of many reasons to visit The Marshmallow Room, a tiny tea room, and its fine-dining sister, the Bloomfied Carriage House restaurant. Suffice it to say, this is where the region's top-

quality local and organic ingredients go to receive the full artisanal treatment. The Marshmallow Room, 260 Main St., Bloomfield, 800-801-4905, www.bloomfieldcarriagehouse.com.



As I set out to get a snap-shop of the true tastes of the County, I was determined to veer off the beaten path and find out where the year-round residents nibble and nosh. With my cooler stocked with the best jams, the flakiest apple pies, and eggs so fresh that they were still speckled with dirt and feathers, I became curious about some of the less portable country fare. I wanted to find out where the food-obsessed locals unwind after work, where they shop for a dinner party, and where they gather on the weekend for an old-fashioned breakfast. Here are a few stops that the locals say should make any County visitor feel right at home.

The Lighthouse Restaurant (33 Bridge St., Picton), housed in The Picton Harbour Inn, is an ever popular spot for home-style bacon-and-eggs breakfasts, but I opted for the creative brunch at **The Painted Peppercorn** (172 Main St., Picton). Owner Renata Lenc, who ran Café Margit in Orleans until she and her husband moved to the County three years ago, brings an artsy vibe to the sunny spot inside a former farmers' seed repository built in 1917. The chalkboard menu, which features as many local ingredients as possible, changes often. That said, Lenc knows better than to remove the outrageously decadent deep-dish banoffee pie from her dessert case.

For on-the-go visitors, Picton's Main Street happens to be the home of some extraordinary fast food. Don't be confused (as I was) by the fact that a handful of shops share the same

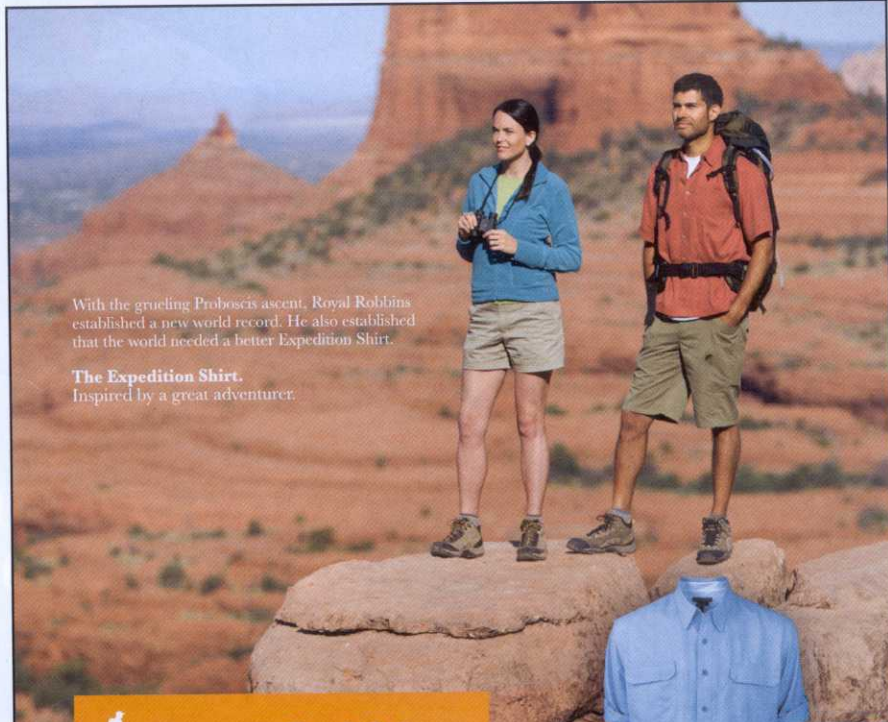
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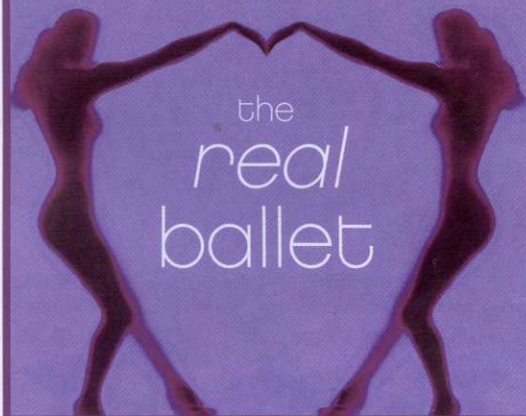
address at number 172. You can't miss **Buddha Dog**. Oozing with hipness, it sells tiny gourmet hot dogs made with local beef and garnished with local cheeses and chutneys on buns that are baked fresh right across the street. Tucked in around the corner is **The Acoustic Grill**, a local haunt famous for fat, juicy, hand-packed, burgers and crunchy handmade potato chips that are served alongside live music. A few blocks down, **Schooner's Fish & Chips** (72 Main St.) serves up classic deep-fried cod and halibut next to hand-cut fries, wrapped in newsprint.

"Except for laying the eggs and churning the butter, we make everything ourselves"

—Suzanne Schroedter,
Schroedter's Farm Market

As the number of big-city residents in the County grew, ex-Torontonians and chefs Michael and Karin Potters recognized the need for a place that caters to urban tastes. "We're used to being able to get the ingredients we want," says Karin, who now runs the go-to gourmet shop **Pinch** (7 Elizabeth St., Picton), while Michael runs the kitchen at their restaurant, **Harvest**. The relationship between the two businesses means Pinch is another place to find the Potters' local wild-boar terrine and other specially sourced ingredients, including local lamb and fresh fish brought in twice a week. Karin's rotisserie chickens with *herbes de provence* and her protein-packed power salad are popular takeout staples.

No County visit is complete without a heaping scoop of **Slickers** homemade ice cream (271 Main St., Bloomfield). All natural and mostly organic, it is made with fresh pears, berries, cantaloupes, lavender, and rhubarb plucked from neighbouring farms whenever possible. Whole freshly baked apple pies, made from local apples, are crumbled into vanilla ice cream to make one of their most popular flavours. But fiercely loyal fans of real burnt fire-roasted marshmallows will tell you the Campfire ice cream can't be beat. **END**



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