

Agriculture's best and brightest honoured

2009 PREMIER'S AGRI-FOOD INNOVATION EXCELLENCE AWARDS

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The best and brightest innovators in agriculture were celebrated in a ceremony here.

And it was one of the village's hometown girls – Prince Edward-Hastings MPP and provincial Agricultural Minister Leona Dombrowsky – who fittingly chose the local agricultural society's building as a backdrop to pass out the 2009 Premier's Agri-Food Innovation Excellence awards. The awards aim to recognize innovators who contribute to the success of Ontario's farming and food sector.

"I am a Tweed girl, so welcome to my hometown," Dombrowsky proclaimed at the beginning of the ceremony to recognize 14 award winners from the Ottawa Valley west to the Durham Region.

"With these awards, we are recognizing and rewarding creative ideas growing on farms and rural communities across the province," she said.

It's in the nature of farmers and those who work in the agrifood industry to be innovators, she explained, but most are never truly acknowledged for their work in the field.

"These are the kinds of things that you do everyday on your farm ... and these awards are intended to celebrate your innovation."

As previously announced in April, Prince Edward County's Fifth Town Artisan Cheese picked up the top prize, the Premier's Award, which had a \$100,000 cash prize. Friday's event was to pay tribute to winners from this region, each of whom picked up a \$5,000 prize.

Here is a list of the winners who were honoured in Tweed, Friday:

- * Durham Farm Fresh Marketing Association (Hampton, Durham Region);
- * CIPM Inc. (Madoc, Hastings County);
- * Ontario Water Buffalo Company (Stirling, Hastings County);
- * Quinte Organic Farmers Cooperative Inc. (Hastings and Northumberland counties);
- * Kawartha Ecological Growers (Woodville, Kawartha Lakes County);
- * Windblest Farm (Lanark County);
- * Wendy's Mobile Market (Lyndhurst, Leeds & Grenville County);
- * Paul Goddard (Brighton, Northumberland County);
- * Ontario Lamb Improvement Breeding Strategy (Norwood, Peterborough County);
- * County Roots – Food Focus Program (Picton, Prince Edward County); * The County Cider Company (Picton, Prince Edward County);

* Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Company (Picton, Prince Edward County);

* Vicki's Veggies (Milford, Prince Edward County);

* Ottawa Valley Food Cooperative (Cobden, Renfrew County).

Quinte West farmer and president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture Bette Jean Crews said the awards were "very much a part of what this industry needs to help spread word to the consumer about how modern and mainstream farmers have become."

The typical stereotype of an old-time farmer befuddled with technological advances is no longer applicable, she said.

"These types of awards are good and necessary – farmers, by their nature, are innovators and are always looking for ways to modernize and move forward the industry."

In many ways, the event itself was in the spirit of a family reunion: about 100 people gobbled down a gourmet buffet – containing Ontario food products only, of course – while catching up with other leaders in their field.

"This is a good event to be associated with, and we were happy to pick up the win," said Achim Mohssen-Beyk, president of the Quinte Organic Farmers Cooperative.

The group of local certified organic farmers has been working together and expanding over the past six years, he explained, and all work to share knowledge and marketing strategies.

"It's been good for us to work together, and it's nice to have this award to recognize it," said Mohssen-Beyk.

Brighton-area resident Herborg Goddard said the event proved to be a good chance to network with others in the agrifood industry, in addition to being a chance to bend the ear of the Minister of Agriculture.

"It's wonderful to speak with all of these people and hear the different stories," said Goddard, whose son Paul picked up an award for innovation in apple growing.

He developed a foil-like mulch that is applied below the canopy of apple trees which redirects sunlight to the underside of the fruit, resulting in a more uniform colouring – and better selling – product.

Dombrowsky said the wide variety of winners is a tribute to the diversity in the field.

"And when you look at other provinces, Ontario is quite unique – we are the most diverse agricultural province in Canada. And the contributions seen here today add much to the strength of this industry and sector."

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