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## ONTARIO PROUD

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# Feasts from the Fields

Get to the source of Ontario's finest home-raised, homegrown and homemade foods

Ontario's fine food producers are coming of age. Just as our wine industry has begun to take its rightful place on the world stage of viniculture, there's a growing hunger for the food that's grown and raised right here in this province.

Diners are demanding to know more about where their food comes from and how it's made. They are also developing their sense of curiosity and adventure in exploring local food. "I lived in New York in the year 2000, and people were obsessed with food. We're finally developing the culture of food. It's very important,

and it's just fun," says Tom Brodi, chef de cuisine at Toronto's Canoe. "That's what this industry is all about. Seeing products coming in: that's what makes me drive every single day. I love it."

One of Ontario's advantages, Brodi says, "is just having all these farmers accessible to us. We don't have to go to California and other places, and have them ship oranges

that are rock hard or green, and don't ripen for days." Brodi particularly praises our indigenous products: "our Icewines, maple syrups, chokecherries: it's the best; it's our home."

According to Martin Kouprie, chef and co-owner of Toronto's Pangaea, "We're forced to be creative." And Kouprie thinks this is actually a good thing. "We're not in a temperate zone, so we don't have constant

warmth all year round. We have to forage a lot harder, but we've got an abundance of interesting ingredients that are available to us. We've just got to get used to what's in our own backyard and rely less on imported foods... and that includes our indigenous products."

Local ingredients don't have to break the bank, Kouprie says. He suggests buying the less beautifully-shaped vegetables; buying in season, making soups (which are popular but can have a high profit margin), and getting creative with humble workhorses like "the maligned button mushroom" as well as cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, kale, radishes and turnips. But where to source Ontario's abundance?

#### Cookstown Greens

An indispensable advocate of locally grown Ontario produce is David Cohlmeier of **Cookstown Greens** in Thornton, Ontario, an hour north of Toronto (705-458-9077, [www.cookstowngreens.com](http://www.cookstowngreens.com)). Cohlmeier was the owner and chef of *Beggars Banquet* and also served as a food writer for *The Globe and Mail* before he opened his business as little more than an ambitious market garden in 1988. Now he operates a farm with four year-round greenhouses and winter root cellars that produces an astonishing variety of salad greens, edible flowers and vegetables. "He's certainly in the forefront of macro farming," says Brodi.

The company website documents everything that's available seasonally, month by month. Cohlmeier places a special emphasis on providing heritage or heirloom varieties, and also grows products that are not common on most Ontario farms. The crop selection is chosen with the needs of the professional kitchen



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"We're finally developing the culture of food. It's very important, and it's just fun."

— Tom Brodi, chef de cuisine, Canoe

in mind. For instance, Cookstown Greens sprouts an exquisite year-round selection of tender seedlings for salads and garnishes, from relatively common sunflower sprouts to the less well known seedlings of chickpea, crimson chard, bulls blood and red amaranth. These provide brilliant splashes of colour and zings of fresh flavour even through the dull winter months.

Cohlmeier's client list reads like a who's-who of upscale Toronto dining establishments, from the Air Canada Centre to C5 at the new Royal Ontario Museum, including Bymark, North 44, Splendido and Canoe, as well as hotels like the Royal York, the King Edward, the Four Seasons and the Drake. Not least impressively, he supplies Michael Stadtlanders's Eigensinn Farm, renowned for its fiercely fresh focus. And no wonder; with access to seasonal

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delights like purple snow peas, spruce candles, garlic scapes, red mizuna and shiso, purslanes, pineapple sage and a rainbow selection of multicoloured heritage tomatoes, chard, carrots and peppers, no chef need ever serve a plate that lacks colour interest, textural contrasts or delightful presentation.

**100km Foods Inc.**

Another dedicated pair of local-produce pioneers is Paul Sawtell and Grace Mandarano of Toronto, who founded their **100km Foods** (416-203-2164, [www.100kmfoods.com](http://www.100kmfoods.com)) after an extensive backpacking trip through Asia. Inspired by the wish to promote local

and sustainable food, they created a business that purchases locally grown produce and related products directly from their sources and delivers them to chefs in the Toronto area. The company name, of course, refers to the environmentally-conscious goal of sourcing food from within a 100-kilometre radius.

“They’re basically the chef’s voice. They’re just incredible, and the stuff is phenomenal,” says Brodi. “I would love to go to visit the farms,” he adds. However, he points out, no working chef can spend the day picking up Saskatoon berries and shallots from Stratford, local honey from Stouffville, varietal wine vinegars from Niagara-On-The-Lake, cold-pressed Canadian canola and soybean oils from Norfolk, heirloom apples and maple syrup from Uxbridge and potatoes from Mt. Albert... which is exactly what 100km Foods can do on their behalf.

“Because they’re the ones that are going to all these farmers and being the voice for these farmers, these guys make it realistic for us to keep Ontario going full-tilt,” Brodi says.

**La Ferme Black River Game Farm**

Once known as Black River Game Farm, this unique supplier bought out its Quebec-based distributor, La Ferme du Gourmet, to become **La Ferme Black River Game Farm** (800-263 1263, [www.lafermeblackriver.ca](http://www.lafermeblackriver.ca)). Based in Pefferlaw, La Ferme supplies the best kitchens with fresh meat, game and foie gras, as well as patés, terrines, rillettes, salmon and cheeses from Ontario, Quebec and elsewhere. La Ferme’s website carries endorsements from the likes of Jamie Kennedy and Masayuki Tamaru (Masa); they are especially

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famous for their license to carry Nunavut wild-hunted caribou, a rare and much-sought-after commodity.

A few other Ontario meat suppliers also win special acclaim from chefs. Among these are **Cumbræ Farms** (Fisherville: 519-428-8356. Toronto:

416-923-5600, [www.cumbraes.com](http://www.cumbraes.com)), who raise their own Angus and Wagyu beef, Dorset and Texel lamb, Yorkshire Duroc and Berkshire pork, and free-range chickens. Also worthy of mention is Mississauga-based **Leavoy Rowe Beef Co.** (905-272-2330,

866-444-7974, [www.leavoyrowe.com](http://www.leavoyrowe.com)). William Leavoy, Chip Leavoy and Rod Rowe provide a full line of beef, veal, lamb, poultry, pork and game. "The biggest thing I'm buying from them right now is Wellington County Beef," says Brodi.

### Pingue Prosciutto

Mario Pingue learned the art of curing meat from his grandfather in Italy. When he opened a restaurant in Niagara Falls in the 1970s, he discovered that good prosciutto was hard to find, so he started to make his own, eventually training his sons Mario Jr. and Fernando in the family business. It was Michael Olson of On The Twenty who suggested that **Pingue Prosciutto** (905-356-8118, 800-324-2998, [www.pingueprosciutto.com](http://www.pingueprosciutto.com)) should begin producing enough to supply the Niagara Region's growing local restaurant scene.

In 2001, with the help of Italian prosciutto producer Rino Coradazzi, the Pingue family business moved to a higher level of production. Under the new name of Niagara Food Specialties, they relocated to a 2,400-square-foot facility and began to supply restaurants much farther afield, including Toronto's Oliver Bonacini restaurants, Allen's, Celestin and One.

Their signature product is of course prosciutto, made by traditional Italian methods from Canadian pork and aged without any preservatives except sea salt for 12 to 15 months. They also produce a range of other charcuterie, like capicola, which is rubbed with herbs and spices and hung for two to three months. Their product line also includes pancetta, guanciale, Italian-style pork sausage and the air-dried salted beef known

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as bresaola, which is made from Canadian eye of round, cured in wine and salt, rubbed with seasonings and hung for two to three months.

### Notable Ontario Cheesemakers

A herd of brown-and-white Guernsey cows owned by the Comfort family of Niagara provides all the milk for the artisanal cheese made by the **Upper Canada Cheese Company** in Jordan Station (905-562-9730, [www.uppercanadacheese.com](http://www.uppercanadacheese.com)). In operation since 2005, Upper Canada produces only three types of cheese. Their Niagara Gold is an Oka-style semi-soft, washed rind cheese whose buttery flavours become more pronounced as they age. After resting in a brine solution, the young cheese is hand-washed weekly for five months,



Cohlmeyer's client list reads like a who's-who of upscale Toronto dining establishments, from the Air Canada Centre to C5 at the new Royal Ontario Museum



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— Tom Brodi, chef de cuisine, Canoe

which allows the peach-coloured rind to bloom into a richer, darker colour.

Comfort Cream is a soft, Camembert-style cheese with a velvety white rind and creamy, golden interior that is hand-salted, hand-turned and hand-wrapped; it is cellared for at least four weeks before sale. Upper Canada also produces limited quantities of Guernsey Gold Ricotta from leftover whey, which

must be eaten soon after it is produced.

Ontario’s cheese industry is less developed than that of Quebec, but there are several other producers to watch. For example, Woolwich Dairy in Orangeville (519-941-9206, 877-438-3499, www.woolwichdairy.com) produces goat cheeses including traditional chèvre, which is available plain or with flavourings such as

herbs, garlic or cranberries (their fig-flavoured chèvre is especially delicious). They also produce goat feta, cheddar, mozzarella and very tasty goat brie and triple crème brie.

A “best-kept secret” is eastern Ontario’s **Forfar Dairy and Cheese Factory** (613-272-2107, www.forfar.com). It has been in operation more or less continuously since 1863, making it Ontario’s oldest operating independent cheesemaker. Forfar produces an assortment of sheep, goat and cow cheeses including feta and curd cheese, but the pride of the dairy is the fine extra-old cheddar, which has a pleasing pale yellow-white colour and a characteristic rich, sharp flavour; the feel in the mouth is creamy with a slight crackle against the tongue. Made in 90-pound blocks, it is aged at least five years: a true treasure of Ontario’s dairy industry.

Finally, since 2005 cheesemaker Ruth Klahsen of **Monforte Dairy Company Ltd.** in Millbank (www.monfortedairy.com) has rapidly been endearing herself to southern Ontario foodies with a wide selection of fine artisanal sheep’s and goat’s milk cheeses ranging from cheddar to feta to ricotta to yogurt. To illustrate the variety, Monforte produces include what is likely Canada’s only 100 per cent sheep’s milk halloumi; the seductive sheep’s-milk “Piacere” – coated with rosemary, savoury, chili pepper and juniper berries – and “Don’s Blue”, a salty, blue-veined goat’s milk cheese dedicated to hockey’s own Don Cherry. To the sorrow of many, Monforte is taking a year’s respite to relocate to Stratford. Cooks and diners alike will rejoice when the company opens its doors again. █

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