



## Misty's View of Cooking

In my house dwell two chefs (my husband and I), two eager, budding chefs (our sons) and two kitchens full of two culinary careers' worth of kitchen paraphernalia. Our abode is a blend of stuff from our two past restaurants combined with the newest innovations in professional cooking tools needed for our at-home catering business. Food is our life and we would not have it any other way, even when we cut back on calories to maintain a healthy weight.

For many in the southern end of the Niagara Escarpment, food has also become a source of inspiration and regular attention. Gone are the days of European culinary domination; here is the annual celebration of outstanding local products and exceptional wines. We have been sitting on this gold mine for centuries, but only in the past 30 or 40 years has the spirit of the land, guided by whisperings from our rich immigrant and indigenous souls, been unearthed.

The products from the Niagara area prove the point. Simply look around your grocery stores, on the side roads that link all of our major byways, in wine shops and the LCBO. This long rock is growing products that speak of the unique soil and wines that are infused with its delicious "minerality."

So how do we embrace all of this fertility? The first step is to experiment with locally produced foods and wines. In Ancaster for example, Rowe Farms, a local poultry producer, is featured daily in the enormous Fortinos store. In this setting anyone has the opportunity to sample the

quality of a truly local product. In nearby Dundas, Cumbreas of Dundas, a gourmet butcher shop, produces fresh sausages and brings in the highest quality of meats they can procure from local producers.

Last June the strawberry farmers had a premature harvest of tiny berries. There was outrage from customers who complained about the size of the fruit. A local producer told me that she could not make people understand that her berries were actually the sweetest, most flavourful strawberries they had grown in years. Jumbo, pale, and sometimes flavourless California imports have become the benchmark for size, regardless of taste.

This producer hopes for the weather to co-operate again so that she may see the same-sized fruit next year. Quality rules over size and she hopes that the general public will learn that some of the best foods come from the soil and not an engineered crop.

The second step to getting closer to our Escarpment roots is to work with the products, to seek them out, purchase them, and use them when they are at their peak of freshness. But using often means cooking. That is where I hope to come into play.

Ah! Cooking. I feel your dread. Why is it that most adults in our generation have virtually no substantial skills in cooking? The family menu choices are usually listed as packaged food favourites – boxed pasta and powdered cheese, frozen meals, or a five-finger list of real dishes that may have been passed down or learned from a magazine.

We are rocket scientists, doctors, lawyers, dentists, teachers, farmers, business people, but we often lack the basic knowledge to survive our weekly food dilemma and answer the deeper, perennial question: What are we going to have for dinner? The ultimate irony may lie in our enormous, granite-countered cathedrals to food that have rarely seen any cooks.

A loose paraphrase of culinary philosopher Brillat-Savarin's fa-

mous observation, "We are what we eat" holds many interpretations for us today. For the endurance runner, food may be a scientific recipe of blended drinks, with fats and carbs calculated to lab specifications but for the average, health-conscious person, food and its preparation merely present stress. And clearly, this group cannot say with pride that they are what they eat, since where

your stress ease just at the thought of it? Slow food, slow times at home during the week and weekend. Spa food might very well take on an entirely new connotation!

In columns to come, I plan to suggest some of the easy but fundamental skills that apply to cooking anything, anywhere. I will also show you how to feel confident enough to let the ingredients



PHOTOS: MIKE DAVIS

and when they eat could reveal such formerly unheard-of locations as the car, the GO train, a bank line up or beside a mountain of paperwork.

At the Ancaster Old Mill Restaurant, executive chef Jeff Crump started the Ontario chapter of the Slow Food movement. It is his contention that scenarios like the ones described above create a need in the hospitality industry to forsake quality for speed in culinary preparations. The movement has the potential to get customers and gourmet enthusiasts to slow down their lives and their approach to food. Doesn't

"speak" to you, and the recipe books stay closed on the shelf beside you for reference, but not to follow blindly. A little knowledge could open up your pantry and fridge as storehouses of personal culinary inspiration. Stock them well with the best of Escarpment products and magic can transpire.

**Misty Ingraham and husband Bill Sharpe** owned and ran *Chez Bear Bistro* in Toronto, *The Portable Feast* in Hamilton, and now operate the catering business *The Portable Feast at Home*.