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## FEATURE - a Fresh (and Local) Perspective

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# A FRESH (AND LOCAL) PERSPECTIVE

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by josephine matyas photos by scott adamson

If you crave adding local foods to your table – but lack the space, inclination or time – rest assured that it doesn't have to involve shovelling compost, raising chickens in your own backyard or rising at the crack of dawn to start loaves for the oven. It can be as simple as looking for farmers markets, pick-your-own fields and small providers when you're out and about. To gain some insight into our local harvest, *Kingston Life* talked to six regional food producers about their work and discovered just who's behind our uniquely local flavour.



## Fruition Berry Farm

**Owners:** Ken and Christine Paul

**Location:** 3208 Hughes Road, Kingston

Knowledge is passed from parent to child: that's the way it's been done in the Paul family for several generations.

"I grew up on my parents' place, the Paulridge Berry Farm just north of Napanee — they've been going 36 years," says Ken Paul, the owner of Fruition Berry Farm just outside Kingston. "My father has been there his entire life. My family has been farming for a long time and that farm has been in the family since my great-grandfather bought it. It's been really nice having my parents there as a resource."

About six years ago, Ken and his wife, Christine, followed into the family business by buying 250 acres of farmland just out Highway 15 north of Kingston with the goal of establishing a pick-your-own berry farm for the city's residents. Their main crop is straw (it's used to mulch the berry plants) but they've planted 20 acres of strawberries and 10 acres of raspberries. And they're looking far into the future. Maple trees have been planted in the hope that someday their children will take interest in running a maple syrup operation.

"Before I opened Fruition I was cash cropping soybeans, corn and wheat with my father on about a thousand acres. I've been doing that together with him since I graduated from university."

The Pauls' goal at Fruition is to be primarily a pick-your-own farm. Anything else they produce they'd really like to sell right from the farm.

"After the strawberries in early summer, we have pick-your-own raspberries, pick-your-own peas and beans, and the high-bush blueberries will be ready in about two years. This year our first pick-your-own apple crop will be ready. In the fall we have a corn maze and in October a pick-your-own pumpkin patch as well. We try to add new crops each year."

"Farming is more than just a job for us. It's a way of life," says Ken, as he explains their goal to find a balance between modern farming technologies and low-impact biological methods that respect the natural environment. "It's a great opportunity for kids from the city to get out and learn where their foods come from."

"I would love for my kids to grow up on this farm and to take over working the land when they are my age."



## Honey Wagon Farms

**Owner:** Ed and Sandi Taylor

**Location:** 265 Sandy Hook Road, Picton

If you don't know exactly what a honey wagon is, Ed Taylor will quickly bring you up to speed.

"In southern Ontario a honey wagon is a manure spreader and we sold our first veggies from a platform on top," laughs the retired teacher who, with his wife, Sandi, has been farming just outside Picton for the past 11 years.

At the very heart of the Taylors' philosophy is this: "We only sell what we grow. We don't buy our produce from wholesalers or from the large outlets in Toronto. We grow what we sell and we just sell what is seasonal at that point."

This means that a stop by the Honey Wagon stall at the Kingston Public Market will offer a snapshot of what's actually in season at any time.

Think you know potatoes? At Honey Wagon they grow 42 varieties. Ten types of cherry tomatoes, eight varieties of carrots and a whole selection of what Ed calls "odd-ball things on the table to attract people: multicoloured beets, horseradish, large shallots, huge red and white onions, celeriac and heritage vegetables like citron."

The planning season starts when snow still blankets Prince Edward County, in the dead of winter when seed catalogues start filling the mailbox at the Taylors' farm.

"There's a lot of really good producers at the Kingston Market," says Ed, "so we try to look for something that someone else is not likely to have grown, so we are offering something a little different."

After the seed has been ordered, things are already busy at the farm long before mid-June when the Taylors show up with fresh peas and potatoes at the Kingston Public Market. There's sap to be tapped and boiled from maple trees.

"Farming is such a critical part of what we do," explains Ed. "We only sell what we produce on our farm, starting with maple syrup in the spring — we hang about 550 buckets and boil traditionally over wood — and ending with pumpkins and squash in the fall."

"We see ourselves as stewards of our land," explains Sandi. "It's great for people at market to know they can come to visit our farm. We invite people to come out and have a picnic or a hike, and we just ask them to leave Mother Nature as they found it. Our farm is a beautiful piece of property and we treat it as a gift."



## Colebrook Honey

### by Bill & the Bees

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**Owner:** Bill Kirby

**Location:** 625 Colebrook Road, Yarker

With beekeeper Bill Kirby, learning is key. It's no coincidence that the now-retired St. Lawrence College professor started into bees at the same time as he started his teaching career 30 years ago — both have been learning-centred experiences.

"At around that same time I bought 25 acres close to the village of Colebrook. I was looking for ways to spend my summers and some way to connect to the land and with nature. Bees came into my life fairly quickly. A colleague had a couple of hives and he showed me what it was about. I immediately fell in love with them. They're such fascinating life forms and they're quite a complicated insect."

Thus, the learning curve began.

"I purchased two hives and I took a course on beekeeping," says Kirby. "There was also a club in Belleville for beekeepers and I attended that for a while."

About 25 years ago, Kirby started a support group for beekeepers, the Limestone Beekeepers Guild, and is now its president. About 50 members come from Brockville to Napanee, getting together six times per year. "It's a great place for the experienced people to pass along a bit of knowledge and for new beekeepers to ask questions."

Back on the farmstead, Kirby stays busy managing about a dozen hives that each produce up to 100 pounds of honey per year.

"We sell it all from the door of our farmhouse here on Colebrook Road." Sales are never a problem — there are a lot of loyal customers who come to the house. Kirby has sold out of last year's product, but a new crop will be available in mid-September.

With the beekeepers' guild well-established and his business humming along, Kirby has been looking for a new challenge.

"A carry-over from my teaching days has encouraged me to continue to be a teacher," he explains. "To me, bees are such a fascinating creation and that is part of what has held my interest. I'm still an active beekeeper, but am now interested in holding workshops in beekeeping."

Kirby has designed a small summertime program he calls "A Beekeeper for an Afternoon" that is a basic orientation to the world of bees.

"With honeybees, the longer I'm with them, the more I learn about them because there's that much more to learn. I liken honey to wine. The honey from a small producer is kind of like village wine — it's from a very small district. You get more interesting flavour from honey that is from a small geographic area."



## Waddell Apples

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**Owner:** Marita and Charlie Waddell

**Location:** 2645 Washburn Road, Kingston

In the Waddell family, the apple does not fall far from the tree.

"This has been our first farming venture, but we both come from apple-farming backgrounds in southern Quebec," explains Marita Waddell, who operates Waddell Apples with her husband, Charlie. "Our families are both in apple farms — my husband's since fourth generation and my parents were first-generation farmers."

They came to Kingston after following careers in Toronto (he was a teacher, she still works full-time in information technology) because it was a smaller community and closer to their aging parents. It was a lifestyle change made after their children were grown and gone.

It's the Waddells' commitment to environmentally friendly and sustainable apple-farming practices that make their small, specialized operation stand out.

"We're a mixed organic and conventional orchard," explains Marita. "The climate doesn't lend itself to organic growing for apples very easily in this area. We use a minimal pesticide spray and an organic product that deters pests and fungus."

In addition to minimal spray applications, the Waddells opt for gentle environmental-stewardship practices, even though they may be more labour-intensive: mowing under trees rather than using herbicides, planting evergreen trees as a "shelter belt" along key border areas to prevent sprays from drifting to waterways and wetlands, and irrigating from a pond that also provides a sanctuary for frogs and waterfowl.

"Our farm is a nice rolling landscape with a view of the Rideau Canal at the Lower Brewers Locks. It's very pretty, which makes it work as part of the agritourism approach," says Marita. "The main farm is 13 acres with 1,200 trees and 14 or 15 varieties that are producing. All of our crop is sold directly from the farm, through a combination of pick-your-own and ready-pick apples from the little log cabin store at the front of our barn." Sales of ready-pick apples start in early August; the family-friendly pick-your-own runs from Labour Day weekend to Thanksgiving.

As if the days weren't busy enough, Marita operates a seasonal food bakery selling pies and crisps, apple jelly and butter, sweet apple cider and apple leather. A local producer provides honey.

But for the Waddells — as it was for their ancestors — it's all about staying connected to the land and sharing the knowledge gained with others.

"We're very interested in involving people in farming, and creating an environmentally sustainable and economically viable operation."



## Pykeview Meadows

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**Owners:** Christina and Jason Pyke

**Location:** 1465 Highway 95, Wolfe Island

Bison ranch has an exotic ring to it. The large beasts are usually associated with the Great Plains and the Wild West, but on Wolfe Island — right on Kingston's doorstep — Christina and Jason Pyke have been tending a herd of bison that are a growing part of their unique family-farming venture.

"It started a few years ago," explains Christina. "We came across the bison on a trip out west in 1995. We came home with lots of ideas, and then purchased our first head of 30 animals the following spring. Our markets have grown steadily since."

Farming is in the Pykes' blood. Jason was raised on Wolfe Island in a family that has been farming on the island for generations (his grandfather and uncle operated the Pykes' berry farm for many years). Christina's family operated a dairy farm in Gananoque. Both attended the University of Guelph's agriculture program before marrying and moving back to Wolfe Island.

"We're a totally family-run business. Jason's dad and his brother help out on a regular basis, so we're lucky to have some great support here," says Christina, as she describes their mixed farming venture: 900 acres of cash crops like soybeans, wheat and corn, and about 120 acres that are home to 150 head of bison.

Despite the rapid growth in their business, there are still unique challenges that come with raising the enormous beasts. "The biggest is that bison are still wild animals. So in terms of handling the animal, one must be careful. You have to be properly set up for these animals; regular cattle facilities are not tough enough."

For many years, Pykeview Meadows was selling their bison meat at the Kingston Public Market. This year the Pykes are trying something a little different. "Instead of selling from the market, we've opened a store at our farm and we welcome folks to come here to the farm Fridays and Saturdays. Most days we offer fresh and frozen products: steaks, bison burgers and sausages, with a good selection of all cuts. The most popular cuts are the steaks in the summer: tenderloin or striploin. And you can't go wrong with a good old burger — the meat is lean and locally grown. Many people are embracing that fact as well."



## Bread & Butter Bakery

**Owner:** Wendy Whitall

**Location:** 1530 Bath Road, Kingston

What Wendy Whitall did not know about the business of baking (which wasn't much, after her previous career as a pastry chef in a Niagara restaurant) she has learned on the fly while leading the impressive growth of Bread & Butter Bakery over the past 13 years.

This everything-from-scratch Kingston bakery was supposed to be a small, modest venture, but these things don't always go exactly as planned.

"It was supposed to be very small — just me with my husband helping out a bit — but it grew really quickly and now we have 30 employees and my whole family works here, including two daughters and my retired husband who is now a full-time baker," explains Whitall. "The kitchen works 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with three shifts of people baking. All the product we bake gets sold out of this one little store."

With such explosive growth came the need for more management — not quite how Whitall enjoyed spending her time. Luckily, her daughter has picked up the reins in that department and Whitall is back where she really loves to be: in the kitchen baking up a storm.

"The baked goods are what started us out. The products like pies, breads, sticky buns and butter tarts always sold very well. Now, I can't say that we have a single specialty. We have a large variety and have branched out into many more products — not only the traditional baked goods, but a line of savoury foods as well, like take-home foods and sandwiches."

Whitall is at her happiest in the bakery kitchen, nudging along that long, happy union between flour and yeast.

"We make about a dozen types of bread — including a bread with locally grown wheat and rye flours from Gananoque and Picton farmers. It has a little bit of a sour tang to it. And our multigrain is unlike any other; it has so many grains and seeds in a whole-wheat flour base. And we make a very popular cheese bread using old cheddar from Wilton Cheese [in Wilton]."

In the bakery business, nothing says "summer" like fruit pies. From long, slender stalks of rhubarb, through sweet, plump strawberries and tender, juicy peaches, the fruits of summer spell perfection when piled into pastry crusts and popped in the oven.

"Because they're made here from scratch on the premises, customers know it's all made naturally without any artificial preservatives," says Whitall.

And like a true entrepreneur, Whitall is the first to give credit to her team of employees. "What we do is very labour-intensive work," she says. "And they do almost everything by hand, sometimes in the heat. It really takes a very dedicated team to do what we do and make sure the quality stays as high as we want it to be."