



Local Harvest

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Region



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Local Food Profile: Kara Smart Foods

There are many stars within the galaxy of food localism—the farmers who grow our food, the consumers who purchase it and even the growing roster of restaurants who feature local foods on their menus. Perhaps a less obvious player in the local food chain is the retailer who serves a crucial role in linking food producers and consumers. *Kara Smart Foods*, operating out of St. Jacob's Farmers Market since 1987, is one such local food hero.

The Kara family began as farmers, occupying a parcel of land adjacent to the St. Jacobs Farmers Market. The patriarch of the family, Thomas Kara, has become known in the region for his knowledge of and passion for peppers. Along with a multitude of pepper varieties, the Karas grew other produce and initially sold farmgate. "We loved growing but it became increasingly difficult to compete with mass farming," says Thomas' son Gerald. The duo soon recognized that there was a niche for food retailing and came to the realization that they could be most effective in this capacity.

"We can identify with local farmers because we have been in their shoes," says Gerald, adding that their empathy and compassion better enable them to market locally-grown food. "What we do here at the market has a direct impact on farmers," he points out. Through their provision of marketing and distribution services they are able to play a vital role in fostering food localism.

While *Kara Smart Foods* occupies a year-round stall inside the market, *The Pepper Shak*, the pride and joy of Thomas Kara, can be found outside from mid summer till first frost. It is perhaps the most photographed stall of the entire market. And it's not hard to see why. The bright vibrant colours of over 50 varieties of local peppers and an array of fresh produce draw both customers and amateur



*Jessica & Thomas Kara selling peppers
at the St. Jacobs Market*

photographers alike. It is truly a feast for the eyes, body and soul.

Thomas Kara's passion for peppers is rivalled only by his passion for people. He is quick to smile and is known affectionately by his customers as simply "Kara". Whether he is sharing his startling knowledge of peppers, extolling the virtues of local farming or posing for yet another photo, it is clear that Kara loves what he is doing.

Much of his produce such as squash, gourds, garlic, potatoes, zucchini, leeks, tomatoes come from the Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative, where the Karas are regulars. His numerous varieties of peppers include shepherd, hot banana, bell, orange, yellow, green and the famous 'Habenero' peppers which Kara says translates into 'crazy hot'! His large banner reads "The Pride of Over 36 Ontario Farmers". But in reality, he represents many more local farmers.

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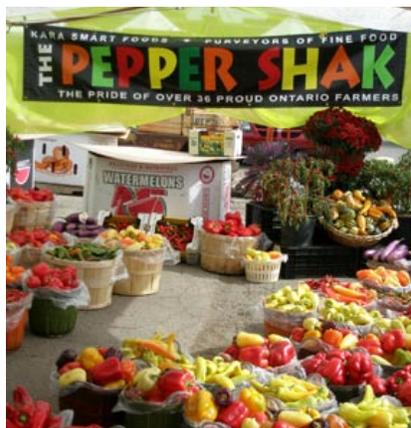
Local Food Profile continued

Inside, Gerald runs the bustling *Kara Smart Foods* stall, selling an array of fruits, vegetables, fresh squeezed juices and organics. Like his father, he enjoys connecting with people and recognizes that as food retailers they are providing a vital role in linking farmers and consumers. Gerald is encouraged by the growing support for food localism. "In the beginning we felt like the lone crusader, but we now feel that there is an increasing awareness of this important issue," he says.

For Gerald one of the highlights of his work is being part of the community and relating to people. "I have regulars who come back week after week and I can share in the milestones, celebrations, trials and tribulations of their lives," he says. He recognizes that food, in essence, is "something that connects us all".

Whenever possible local food is bought and sold but some items are imported to round out the product line and ensure that a variety of produce is available year round. While *Kara Smart Foods* relies on some imports they are different from typical 'buy & sell' vendors who generally seek out cheap, plentiful products. As the name suggests *Kara Smart Foods* focuses on good nutrition and they support fresh, ecologically-friendly farming practices. They also carry a full line of organics. Our ultimate goal is to "keep the region healthy year round," says Gerald.

Some of the challenges they face are increasing government



The Pepper Shak features dozens of varieties of local peppers and is one of the most photographed stalls at St. Jacobs Market

regulations and the constant need to invest in warehouse storage and transportation facilities. Climate change and erratic weather patterns have also had a direct impact on food supply and production. One of the biggest challenges, however, has been competing with the big box stores and larger chain food retailers. "The fact that we no longer have many private grocers is a testament to how difficult the business can be," says Gerald. But he is quick to point out that *Kara Smart Foods* has found ways to differentiate themselves from the larger chain retailers.

For one thing *Kara Smart Foods* has capitalized on the local food angle and as a result has become firmly rooted in the community.

The cornerstone of their philosophy has been

fostering consumer access to local food and its myriad of benefits. Another focal point is consumer education. "We talk to customers about our products, how they are grown and their nutritional value," says Gerald.

The Karas have been a mainstay of the St. Jacobs Farmers' Market for almost a quarter century now. It's no wonder they have become a favourite amongst consumers and farmers alike. We like to think of ourselves as "keepers of the land and champions of local food", says Gerald. May they continue this vital role for many years to come!

For more information on Kara Smart Foods please visit www.karasfoods.com. 🍷



Finding Locally Grown Peppers in Waterloo Region

If you're looking for peppers why not consult Foodlink's Buy Local! Buy Fresh! Map. The 2007 edition features a number of farms close by that grow and sell them.



J. Steckle Heritage Homestead
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Tel. 519-748-4690



Conestogo Garden Produce
1228 Northfield Drive
Conestogo



Brian & Ann Martin
1261 Lobsinger Line, Waterloo
Tel: 519-664-1358



TJ's Farm Fresh Produce
3010 Kossuth Road, Cambridge
Tel. 519-650-1007



Floralane Produce
2191 Arthur St. North, Elmira
Tel: 519-669-3154



Sunny Slopes Family Farm
1183 Northfield Dr. East, Conestogo
Tel: 519-664-1471



Burkhart's Greenhouse
4352 Ament Line, Hawkesville
Tel: 519-698-2243



Clarence Knorr
2477 Lobsinger Line, Heidelberg
Tel: 519-669-4007



Valley Springs
1764 King St. North, St. Jacobs
Tel: 519-664-3093



Corn and More
2050 Bleams Rd E, Shingletown
Tel. 519-634-8686



Edward & Selema Martin
144 Southfield Dr., Elmira
Tel: 519-669-4108



Weber's Family Farm
2844 Lobsinger Line, Heidelberg
Tel: 519-699-6025



Brubacher's Produce
1562 Halm Rd, West Montrose
Tel. 519-664-3214



L'il Abner's Produce
2637 Three Bridges Rd., Elmira
Tel: 519-669-3869



The Pepper Mill...Hot News About Peppers

In the vegetable world, peppers are like the decorations adorning a Christmas tree. Their assortment of glossy shapes in a wide array of vivid colors ranging from green, red, yellow, orange, purple, brown and black bewitch us and keep us coming back for more. But don't expect one *Capsicum* bauble to shine in the same manner as its cousin – peppers are as distinct in their flavour and heat intensity as they are in their shape, colour and cultural traditions.

The *Capsicum* genus represents a diverse plant group, from the well known sweet green bell pepper to the fiery hot habanero chile. *Capsicum* has been known since the beginning of civilization in the Western Hemisphere where ancient Olmecs, Toltecs, Aztecs and others took the wild chile, piquin, and selected for the dozens of types known today, placing chiles among the oldest cultivated crops of the Americas.

The introduction of peppers to Europe and beyond spawned one of the most important global gastronomic influences of Columbus' famous voyages to find a shorter route to India and the spice trade. In 1493, Columbus encountered a plant whose fruit mimicked

the pungency of black pepper, *Piper nigrum*, a highly desirable and expensive Indian spice. Although he called it red pepper because the pods were red, the plant was no relation to black pepper, but a heretofore unknown plant that was later classified as *Capsicum*. In the first half of the 16th century, voyagers to the Americas encountered many forms of peppers, and by the beginning of the 17th century virtually every form known today had been discovered.

Peppers spread rapidly from Europe, via Portuguese traders, into India, China, and Japan and were incorporated into their respective cuisines almost instantaneously. As these plants could be easily grown almost anywhere, the ability to cook with spices was no longer a luxury available only to the rich. Today, peppers are the second most popular seasoning for food, after salt. The early interest in peppers, exemplified through the detailed records and descriptions kept by explorers and traders, is unique in the history of American plants. While important plants such as the potato and tomato were long ignored, to the spice hungry world peppers were an unexpected and most welcome discovery.

Pepper Varieties

Capsicum terminology is confusing. Pepper, chili, chile, chilli, paprika, and *Capsicum* are used interchangeably for plants in this genus. However, all fruits of these plants fall into two groups – the sweet fresh market peppers and the hot, pungent chiles. There are 4 different types of sweet peppers – bell, banana, cubanelle, and pimento. The term bell apparently refers to the fruit's blocky four-lobed shape, first mentioned in 1699 by an English pirate who found them growing in Panama.



The most obvious and desirable attribute of chiles is its pungency, or heat. Some have argued that pungency should be included in the main taste senses, along with bitter, sweet, sour, and salty. National cuisines around the world are defined by the type of chiles used and therefore the degree of pungency or heat experienced in the mouth. In 1912, Wilbur Scoville created a rating system that measures pungency in Scoville Heat Units: mild red bell peppers rate a zero while habaneros tip the scale at over 100,000 heat units. The original test used a panel of five human representatives who sampled chiles and recorded the heat level. Although this method was widely used, it had its limitations as testers had to be highly trained and tester fatigue often occurred. Today, laboratory instruments are used to not only measure the heat intensity but to also define the different capsaicin molecules.

Capsaicin is an alkaloid compound manufactured in the ribs of the chile pepper. Capsaicin itself doesn't have any flavour, so rather than stimulating the taste buds, it stimulates the pain receptors in the mouth. The way to keep the heat down is to remove these spongy, white, inner parts and the seeds resting nearby. Bell peppers, on the other hand, contain a recessive gene that eliminates capsaicin, allowing the flavour of the fruit to shine through.

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Hot peppers can cause burning or nasty irritations if your hands or fingers come in contact with eyes and other sensitive parts of the body. It is advisable to always wear gloves to protect your hands from the capsaicin and, if dried chiles are being ground, be aware that chile dust can fly up into your eyes.

What happens when you find out that the pungency of a dish is a little more than you can handle? One needs only to look at different cuisines of the world to realize that dairy products often provide the antidote. Sour cream with Mexican food, yogurt condiments in Indian meals, and coconut milk in Thai cuisine all prevent capsaicin molecules from adhering to the pain receptors on the tongue. However, it is the fat found in these products that counteracts the heat, so low fat options won't provide the same relief.

The Health Benefits of Peppers

Peppers provide more than heat and taste to foods. They also pack a powerful punch when it comes to being a good source of antioxidant vitamins C and A. Green peppers have twice the amount of vitamin C by weight than citrus fruits, and are a very good source of fibre, folate, and vitamin K. Red bell peppers are simply ripened green peppers that have three times as much vitamin C as the green varieties and eleven times more beta carotene. These antioxidants work together to effectively neutralize free radicals, which are major players in the build up of cholesterol in the arteries, nerve and blood vessel damage seen in diabetes, the cloudy lenses of cataracts, the joint pain and damage seen in osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, and the wheezing and airway tightening of asthma.

Red peppers, like tomatoes, are one of the few foods that contain lycopene, a carotenoid whose consumption has been associated with preventing prostate, cervical, bladder, and pancreatic cancers. Red peppers are also an excellent source of vitamin B6 and contain beneficial phytonutrients lutein and zeaxanthin. The sweet, fruity taste of red peppers can convert even the most vegetable phobic among us – and knowing that one cup of sweet, raw, chopped red peppers provides over 100% of the recommended daily intake for vitamin C and vitamin A, it is apparent that bell peppers are another local super food.

While peppers taste best during the summer months when they are most readily available, Ontario has increased its production of greenhouse peppers during the winter months. At present, there are approximately 90 acres devoted to pepper production in Ontario (about 60 acres in the Leamington area) and plans for expansion are underway. In 2005, a total of 2900 acres were producing peppers with a farm value of over \$13 million. So, this winter, instead of filling a bag with South African or Florida citrus, consider a more local source of vitamin C: roast or pickle this summer's harvest or fill your bag with fresh Ontario peppers.

The pre-Hispanic Americans believed that the pungent chiles contained medicinal qualities and modern science has confirmed that

Fresh Roasted Red Peppers

Ingredients:

- 10 large red Bell or Shepherd peppers
- 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon chopped parsley
- salt and pepper, to taste
- brown paper bag
- 1 tsp sea salt or kosher salt



Procedure:

Preheat broiler or grill. Cook the whole peppers over high heat until they have blackened spots and blisters and are tender.

Place the peppers into a brown paper bag and roll up the top to seal, close to the peppers. Set aside until the peppers cool.

When the peppers are cool, remove the skins. Slice the peppers open and scrape out the cores and seeds. Rinse under water quickly and dry well with paper towels. Cut into strips or halves.

In a clean jar, combine salt, olive oil, garlic and parsley. Add peppers and store in refrigerator for up to three weeks or freeze for up to four months.

the hot varieties are even higher in Vitamin C than their sweeter cousins, containing high levels of vitamins A, E and B1-3. The capsaicin was employed by the Mayas and Aztecs to treat asthma, coughs, sore throats, and toothaches. Today, the pharmaceutical industry uses the same compounds in topical creams to alleviate pain in sore muscles, arthritis, shingles, headaches and more. The ability of capsaicin to prevent or even stop heart attacks by thinning the blood and preventing elevated blood pressure is perhaps one of its most important modern applications.

Besides medicinal treatment, capsaicins have been used to repel barnacles from boats, mice from underground electrical cables, and squirrels from bird seed. Aerosols containing the active ingredients in chiles have replaced mace and tear gas as many police departments. The colour pigments of mild paprika are currently used in a wide assortment of foods, drugs, and cosmetics, as well as for improving the feather colour of flamingos in zoos and koi in aquariums. 🌶️

