Foodlink Waterloo Region

Fresh in focus
Asparagus

Local Harvest

Foodlink Waterloo Region Inc. Issue#4 MAY 2004

Features

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Buying Asparagus in Waterloo Region

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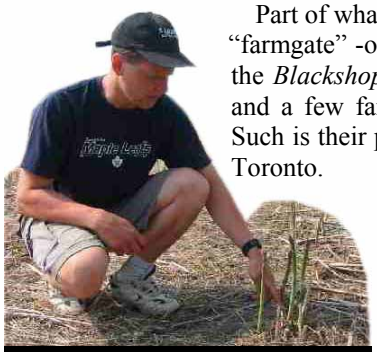
Local Farm Profile: Barrie's Asparagus

Standing at the edge of the 35 acres of asparagus you can see rows upon rows of the spring delicacies popping up their pointed heads. If you turn around you see cars streaming in the lane (over 100 a day). Every time you glance at the road there's another car pulling into the lane of this 122-acre farm just north of the 401, east of New Dundee. All the people are driving out for the first green of the season—fresh local asparagus.

David Barrie was raising beef when his father-in-law, Homer McMann, kept telling him, "Go into asparagus, go into asparagus!" Homer had farmed asparagus for years in Alliston; at one time he was Ontario's largest asparagus producer. He started in 1963 when the Campbell Soup Company approached him and proposed that he grow asparagus for their canning and soup. David followed the advice and now Tim Barrie, son of David and Miriam, is picking some of the same asparagus he planted as a boy on his family's farm 35 years ago. They even pack the asparagus in the same wooden boxes from Campbell's.

With 35 acres of asparagus and an acre of rhubarb, the Barrie family is very busy in the spring. Along with hiring local harvesters and someone to sell asparagus from the field-stone shop next to their house, members of the Barrie family is behind the counter selling asparagus from 8am to 8pm 7 days a week throughout the 40-day harvest. There can be no doubt that this is a "family" farming venture. Tim farms full-time for two months in the spring, Libby makes the shop and farm look beautiful and welcoming, grandparents David and Miriam help with sales and childcare and the kids help out with sales and other tasks as they are able.



Tim Barrie surveying the 2004 crop

Part of what makes Barrie's Asparagus unique is that 99% of their sales are "farmgate" -out of their shop on the farm. Families, local restaurants, (including the *Blackshop, Pioneer BBQ, Graystones, 20 King Street* and the *Wok Wagon*), and a few farmers' market vendors come to the farm from across our region. Such is their popularity that they even attract regular patrons from as far away as Toronto.

What draws all these customers to come every year? Well, it's not an elaborate marketing plan. Tim places an ad in the KW Record and puts up road signs pointing the way to their farm and that's it. Tim explains that most of their advertisement is by word of mouth. "It's so powerful, you don't realize how powerful it is until you do something like this." Sometimes they overhear customers eagerly telling a friend they brought along to the farm the merits of the asparagus or how the shop is made out of the stone walls of an old barn. Tim is continually astounded by the keenness and dedication of their customers. Some of them are third generation buyers. He says that customers keep a close eye on the fields and activities and are very loyal. They are so loyal, Tim claims that, "If I ever sold this farm and didn't sell asparagus, I'd be shot!"

…Story Continued Next Page.

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Farm Profile Cont…

Why do people keep coming back to Barrie's asparagus? Tim thinks it's because they savour the whole farm experience and leave feeling "warm". The farm and shop exude a cozy rural welcome that is a relief from the noise and concrete of the city. Libby's extra touches of flowers and antiques make the shop feel like a comfortable farmhouse kitchen where you want to just sit a spell and talk about the weather. Not only the setting is welcoming; each member of the Barrie family is warm and friendly. Tim believes that warmth and welcome are essential to creating dedicated customers. He's forever telling his daughters, "Make every person feel special each time."

The Barrie Family:
Tim, Libby, Mallory, Emily and Will
(daughter Hannah, missing from photo)

The Barries would love to farm full-time but being dependent on the weather just too risky. On a good year the asparagus would bring in enough to support the family, but a good year is no guarantee. Normally they harvest 1,000 pounds an acre but on a good year they could get double or triple this while a bad year could be as low as 500 pounds an acre. Asparagus is extremely labour intensive crop. All 35 acres need to be picked each day. With 12 workers harvesting 8 hours a day that adds up to a lot of money, especially considering that they pay higher than minimum wage.

An asparagus crop is also expensive to establish ($5,000/acre) and you have to wait a full three years before you can begin to harvest. Then there's the problem of supermarkets promoting very cheap asparagus (often imported from countries like Peru) right during the local peak season. They charge extremely low prices for a hot item (not only asparagus but strawberries and corn as well) and are willing to lose money to succeed in drawing people into the store. While an effective marketing strategy for larger food retail stores, this sales tactic, "loss leadering" often undermines local producers. The Barrie's charge $2.35/lb for firsts and $2.00/lb for seconds. With these moderate prices, the customers aren't paying the true costs of growing asparagus (including farm mortgage, labour, and now skyrocketing fuel prices). Tim estimates that a fair price for asparagus would be closer to $3.00/lb but he doesn't want to charge that for fear of losing some of his long-time customers. Considering that asparagus from Mexico fetches $3.99/lb in April and the Barrie's guarantee of same day freshness (and all green tender spears), then there's no doubt that it is worth $3.00/lb and more!

Some, not all, of the Barrie's love asparagus. Tim claims that he and Libby eat their staple asparagus dish every day for lunch during the season: steamed asparagus on toast with cheese sauce drizzled over both. Local asparagus soup or quiche can be enjoyed year-round, as it's easy to freeze. Just cut up the stalks and throw them into a bag or plastic container and freeze - no blanching needed!

Our Food, Our Community: *Honeyfest 2004*

Mark your calendars for some "sweet" family fun while celebrating local honey. On Saturday June 19th, why not take your friends and family to the *Honeyfest* at Hergott's Cider Mill for fun and free samples of honey. The annual Honeyfest is a full day event (10 am to 4 pm rain or shine)

and promises to be both fun and educational. You'll learn the difference between a bee, wasp and bumblebee, you can see how honey is extracted from the comb and you even get a close up view of an observation hive (without getting near the bees). If you take little people to the Festival, they can balance learning about bees and insects with jumping in the "Bouncy Castle," getting their faces painted and making a candle and other crafts to take home.

If your Saturday is busy, drop in just long enough to sample the honey and pick up some local campfire or wildflower honey from the Hergott's store (also available are apple and pear butter, apple cider, cider vinegar, and more – **see Buy Local! Buy Fresh! Map listing #35**) or if you have time, linger at the picnic tables for lunch. A local youth group will have hamburgers and hotdogs "hot off the bbq", raising funds for their activities.

If you're looking for easy and affordable birthday party activities and venue close by, the Hergott's welcome birthday groups to Honeyfest. All you need to do is bring a cake and call ahead to reserve a table.

Honeyfest not only promotes locally produced honey, but seeks to encourage family wellness—providing an inexpensive alternative to other entertainments. Motivated by the desire to educate the public about farming, local food, and the environment around them, Gerrie Hergott also hopes to "help people understand what the bee world is like" !

Honeyfest 2004
Saturday June 19th, 10am to 4pm
Hergott's Cider Mill and Products
928 Erb Street West, Waterloo

For more information contact:
Gerrie Hergott
885-2306

Local Tastes!

Looking to savour our region's finest?
Try the Barrie's fresh asparagus soup recipe.

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"Tips"on Asparagus

Our Ex "spear" ience with Asparagus

In spring, a food lover's fancy turns to thoughts of asparagus, possibly the must luxurious vegetable that the season has to offer. The green stems we enjoy today derived their name from the Greek word for "sprout" or "shoot" and probably originated from a smaller, spiny species growing wild on the coasts of the Mediterranean. We know that since the second century B.C. asparagus has been established and cultivated as a luxury food. The elder Cato (200 B.C.) discussed its cultivation, but Pliny, some two hundred years later, while also writing of its cultivation, provided the astounding statistic that three 'sticks' might weigh the equivalent of 310g. Today, three spears of asparagus would, on average, weigh about 56g!

The Romans grew asparagus in trenches. This system was generally adopted in countries to which asparagus spread and became the universal method of culture. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, asparagus became quite popular, even appearing in paintings by Manet and Rubens. At first the "sperage" or "sparage", as it was called, was cultivated in gardens for use in large private houses where it was greatly esteemed as a vegetable. By the eighteenth century in England, "sparrow-grass"' or "sparagrass", the common names for the vegetable, had appeared in the local markets for mass consumption.

Nutritional Value

Since ancient times, asparagus has been thought to have special healthful qualities. The harvesting of wild asparagus, famous for its medicinal qualities, was a springtime ritual among Mediterranean peoples. These days, the ritual is more likely to take place in the produce aisles of the supermarket and at local farms in Waterloo Region. Asparagus folklore credits the delicious green spears with everything from curing toothaches to being a reproductive tonic.

Today we know that asparagus truly ***is*** one of nature's food heroes. Just 5 stalks of asparagus is an excellent source of folic acid and a good source of vitamins C and A, antioxidants that slow the progression of cancer and heart disease. Research has shown asparagus to be the most common food containing glutathione, one of the body's most potent cancer fighters and antiviral compounds. Additionally, asparagus is high in rutin, a bioflavinoid that increases blood circulation to the lower limbs, strengthens the blood vessels and enhances their permeability.

GLUTATHIONE

Asparagus, along with avocados and watermelons, are particularly rich dietary sources of gluthathione. Gluthathione is a small protein made up of three amino acids: cysteine, glutamic acid, and glycine. Nutrition researchers have regarded it as the most valuable detoxifying agent in the human body as it participates in a process which prevents the destruction of cellular components and membranes. Furthermore, it assists in the repair of damaged DNA, binds carcinogens, and participates in healthy immune function.

(Nutr Biochem 1997 8:660-72, Am J Epidemiol 1994 139:453-65)

NUTRITION FACTS
Serving Size 5 spears (93g)

Amount per Serving	
25	Calories
2g	Protein
4g	Carbohydrates
1.5g	Fibre
144mg	Potassium
10g	Vitamin C
131mcg	Folate
485 UI	Vitamin A

Buying and Cooking Asparagus

When buying asparagus, look for compact tips and smooth green stems that are uniform in colour. Spears begin to lose their flavour as soon as they are harvested, so it's best to buy fresh, local asparagus. To store, treat asparagus as a cut flower – trim the stems and stand them in a glass with a few inches of water. Above all, ensure that the asparagus is refrigerated.

To prepare it for cooking, hold the top half of the spear in one hand and the bottom half in the other hand. Bend the spear until it snaps into two pieces along a nautral break line between the tender and tougher ends. The bottoms needn't be thrown away! They can be used to flavour soup, stocks, or sauces.

Asparagus can be eaten raw, steamed, boiled, grilled, or roasted. The key to perfectly cooked asparagus is to cook it briefly, for example 3- 4 minutes in boiling water. Herbs such as chives, savoury, thyme and tarragon enhance the flavour of cooked asparagus. But raw asparagus also makes a tempting crudite with flavourful dipping sauces.

The Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) warns that asparagus can be a challenge when it comes to choosing the right wine. The tendency of asparagus to overpower many wines can be remedied by cooking the vegetable in butter with a squeeze of lemon and a touch of salt, or by sprinkling parmesan cheese over top before serving. The richness of the butter or cheese softens the pungency of the asparagus, while the acid from the lemon brings it to life. The LCBO recommends serving a Sauvingon Blanc with asparagus.

Growing Asparagus

Asparagus grows from a crown that is planted one foot deep in sandy soils. Under ideal conditions, an asparagus spear can grow 25cm in a 24 hour period! After harvesting, the spears grow into ferns that produce red berries and the nutrients necessary for a healthy crop the following year. If well cared for, an asparagus plant can produce spears for 15 years, making it one of the few perennial crops grown in Canada. While green asparagus seems to be the preferred choice of North Americans, white asparagus has traditionally been favoured by Europeans. White asparagus can be produced from any variety by mounding soil over the row to a much greater depth than needed for green asparagus, and thereby eliminating the crop's exposure to light. When the spears begin to push through the soil, they are cut while still under the surface. A long knife is then used to cut the spear, but in order to keep the spears white, they must be handled thereafter in the absence of light.

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Buying asparagus direct from the farm

Foodlink's Buy Local! Buy Fresh! Map lists a number of farms and farm stands across Waterloo Region that grow or sell local asparagus direct to the consumer. Looking for the ***freshest*** asparagus this spring? You can refer to the new 2004 edition as your guide. Check out the following local farmers who have fresh picked asparagus ready for you! In most cases it's a good idea to call ahead.

2004 Buy Local! Buy Fresh! MAP

Barrie's Asparagus
1236 King's Rd., Cambridge
Tel. 621-9409
Map Listing **# 6**

Brubacher's Produce
1562 Halm Rd., West Montrose
Tel. 664-3214
Map Listing **# 13**

The Farmarket (Lyle and Karen Cressman)
98 Peel St., New Hamburg
Map Listing **# 27**

Herrle's Country Farm Market
1243 Erb's Rd., St. Agatha
Tel. 886-7576
Map Listing **# 36**

Rolling Acres Pick Your Own
1235 Martin Creek Rd., Waterloo
Tel. 664-1337
Map Listing **# 61**

Stevanus Family Farm
1082 Snyder's Flats Rd., Bloomingdale
Tel. 585-7784
Map Listing **# 70**

Did you know?

Contrary to popular belief, **thinner stems are not an indication of tenderness.** Thick stems are already thick when they poke through the soil, and thin stems do not thicken with age. Tenderness is related to freshness and maturity.

Botanically, **asparagus is part of the lily family**, closely related to onions and leeks?

Great Local Tastes!

Barrie's Asparagus Soup

"This soup, made with our freshly picked asparagus is one of the Barrie family favourites. Enjoy!"

-Libby Barrie

Ingredients: (4 servings)
1lb fresh (or frozen) asparagus (chopped)
¼ cup chopped onion
2 cups chicken broth
2 tbsp. butter or margarine
½ tbsp. flour
½ tsp. salt, dash of pepper
1-cup milk
1 tsp. fresh lemon juice
1 tbsp. fresh chives
½ cup sour cream or plain yogurt

Directions

Asparagus Purée: Cook asparagus, onion and 1cup chicken broth in covered sauce pan. When the asparagus is just tender, pour mixture into a blender and purée until smooth. This can be done ahead and frozen until needed.

Soup: Heat a large saucepan and melt butter. Add flour and stir in 1 cup chicken broth, asparagus purée and milk and bring to a boil. Add salt and dash of pepper to taste. Mix a little of the hot soup mixture into 1/2 cup sour cream or plain yogurt. Stir this back into the soup, then add 1 tsp. fresh lemon juice. Heat to serving temperature and sprinkle with fresh chives.

Asparagus Production in Canada, Ontario and Waterloo Region

- Statistics Canada reported in 2001 that 11 asparagus farms, totaling 49 acres, could be found in Waterloo Region.
- The province of Ontario recorded 2,255 acres of asparagus fields, providing about 2,234 tonnes of asparagus for sale. At $2,916 per tonne, this amounted to a farm value of $6,515,000 for asparagus sales in Ontario.
- According to Foodland Ontario, white asparagus accounts for only 3 acres of production in Ontario