

Digging into Ontario's food heritage

'Living museums' offer visitors a peek at the gastronomic rituals of the past

If you really want to get to the root of Ontario's food legacy, a good place to start is at one of the province's many museums. Especially enlightening are the "living museums," where period-garbed interpreters guide visitors through historic sites, offering a peek at the gastronomic rituals of the past. This includes examining the crops, orchards and gardens that produced so much of what filled pioneer bellies, dyed their clothing and helped cure illnesses.

At Toronto's Black Creek Pioneer Village, the plantings reflect life in the province in the mid-1800s. There's an herb garden with medicinal and culinary plants, including chives, sage, lemon balm and peppermint. "It is always a popular stop," notes Victoria Miller, supervisor of historic programs. "You can smell the herbs and sometimes taste them. It's a sensory experience that links the past and the present."

The village also has a berry garden with raspberries, gooseberries and currants, plus kitchen and market gardens with vegetables, flowers and examples of crops such as flax and broom corn.

"The gardens show what was available at the time, including kale which was popular in the 19th century," says Miller. "People are surprised to learn it is not a new superfood."

Keeping the plants healthy and true to the period is the responsibility of head gardener Sandra Spudic. Plants are researched through sources such as historic seed catalogues and organic fertilizers that include farmyard and organic historically appropriate fertilizers.

"We encourage pollination by growing a wide variety of plants—plant diversity is key to attracting pollinators. All of our vegetable gardens include flowering annuals and herbs," explains Spudic. "Many



TOP: The garden at Dundurn National Heritage Site.
MIDDLE: The herb garden in front of the summer kitchen at Ermatinger Clergue National Historic Site.
RIGHT: A school program at Dundurn National Heritage Site.

of these gardens are bordered by perennial display beds which also incorporate self-sowing annuals, such as snapdragons, pot marigolds and love-in-a-mist."

More than 200 varieties of heirloom fruits, vegetables, flowers and herbs grace the gardens at Dundurn National Historic Site in Hamilton. They represent the period between 1832 and 1862, when the MacNab family lived in Dundurn Castle. The fruit trees include apples, pears, cherries and quince. There is also cane fruit and a variety of berries.

"A few of the plants we are most excited about are the Victoria rhubarb from 1837 and the rare Prince Albert potato we sourced from the Argi-Food Canada Potato Gene Repository in New Brunswick," says Victoria Bick, the site's historic kitchen garden supervisor.

While insects can be a problem, most heritage gardens do not use pesticides. "We take delight in encouraging visitors to try a time-honored task of hand-picking pests such as the Colorado Potato Beetle or Tomato Hornworms off the plants," says Bick.

In Sault Ste. Marie, the Ermatinger Clergue National Historic Site reflects what was grown between 1808-1896 when the Ermatingers and other prominent citizens resided there. The gardens are an inherent part of programming. "In our culinary series, every meal has a connection to what we grow," says curator Kathy Fisher. The series comprises themed dinners and luncheons featuring a guest speaker. In non-COVID years that would include June's Lilac and Lavender event, a Victorian high tea with lavender jelly, fancy sandwiches and sweet treats such as lavender shortbread.

Indigenous plants and plants used by Indigenous peoples are another component of the site's programming. School groups learn about the Three Sisters—squash, corn and beans—that are staples in a number of Indigenous communities. When planted together, they help each other thrive.



To create the symbiotic grouping, students dig a hole and add fish remains as fertilizer. Soil is then added, made

into a mound, and a single corn stalk is planted in the middle. Beans go around the corn and squash is planted at the foot of the mound so that the prickly leaves will help to keep animals away. The chemical balance between these three vegetables works together to support each other's growth, Fisher explains.

Programs like these are popular with school children and adults alike. "Whether it's digging in the dirt or exploring what the garden produces, we design our programs to appeal to everyone," she says. "We have found that everyone likes food."

If you plan to visit a museum site, check in advance to make sure they are open and find out how they are managing COVID protocol.

Summer safety tips

The sun is out and Ontario is calling. Soon, we'll be able to hit the road again. Road tripping for your favourite meals and museums is going to look a little different. Once it's safe to travel, double check the advisories. Then, make sure you've got what you need to keep yourself—and the fine folks who make and serve our food (and drink!)—safe.

MASK UP
Whether you've got one shot, two shots or are still in the cue, health experts state that masks are still our best bet when mingling with anyone outside our household. Keep a few in your glove box (alongside your hand sanitizer) and be sure to wear them correctly—that is, over your mouth and nose, so our friends in hospitality don't have to remind you.

BOOK AHEAD
You're not the only one who wants to explore this season, so booking ahead will be key. Many places, from parks to restaurants to galleries, are only accessible through pre-booking and may be full. Check and double check business hours before visiting and use their bookings systems when available. Most importantly, be patient and flexible. You may need to rebook if new travel advisories are released.

CONSIDER MID-WEEK
Weekends are going to be crowded, even off the beaten track. Consider taking a mid-week mini break or holding off until shoulder season. It will mean a better experience for you and more steady operations for the businesses you want to visit.

Remember to look for the Safe Travels stamp when you travel. It's your assurance that the business you want to visit is taking safety precautions seriously too.

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JON SASAKI HOMAGE

Large-scale photographs of bacterial cultures grown from the palettes and brushes used by the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson.

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Top to bottom: *Microbes Swabbed From a Palette Used by Arthur Lismer (detail)*; *Microbes Swabbed From a Palette Used by F.H. Varley*. All works by Jon Sasaki, 2020, archival print, 91.44 x 91.44 cm, Image courtesy of the artist and Clint Roenisch Gallery.

Coming Soon / Denyse Thomasos Odyssey

Here's what's next for Ontario food tourism

Culinary Tourism Alliance staff share what's on their radar

With planes mostly grounded and borders shut, Ontarians have been given an incredible opportunity to explore their own backyards. Take a trip to Caldwell First Nation, near Leamington, to explore Indigenous food culture, or head north to Manitoulin Island and explore Chutes Provincial Park. So much of food tourism happens outdoors in nature, and with such a vast, diverse province like Ontario, the options are endless—take it from the staff at the Culinary Tourism Alliance.



Dinusha Prasad
Communications coordinator

"I think people are looking for ways to connect with nature, and there's a new appreciation for local foodways. It's a great way to discover the beauty and bounty of Ontario. This season, I want to explore Indigenous food culture. There are some exciting things happening in this space, including Three Fires, the world's largest Indigenous restaurant and community hub that's scheduled to open this year in Caldwell First Nation, located near Leamington."



James Arteaga
Research & engagement coordinator

"When it's safe to visit, I would like to attend one of the many powwows hosted by First Nations communities in the province. The Chippewas of Rama First Nation's Annual Pow Wow or the Grand River Champions of Champions Pow Wow are great places to not only try a variety of foods, but continue to learn about the first peoples whose land we currently live and work on. Many powwows are family-friendly and open to everyone. If you're feeling uncertain about attending, many have a website where they share their protocols for how to engage."



Zoë Galanis
Engagement coordinator

"What excites me most about food tourism in Ontario is that so many of the culinary tourism encounters in the province can be experienced in nature. Food is our connection to the land. Agritourism experiences promote so much learning, a lot of which is hands-on. I know that orchard visits aren't exactly the most unique food tourism experience, but there's just something so special about picking apples off trees in the fall. I'm looking forward to visiting Chudleigh's in Halton Hills."



Trevor Benson
VP of destination development

"Over the past decade, food tourism has become less about travelling for food and more about making food and drink a meaningful part of experiencing a place. We don't need to travel far to experience food or culture. When it's safe to do so, I'd like to take a workshop focused on the manoomin (wild rice) being harvested from the Indigenous waters of Buckhorn, Pigeon and Chemong lakes."



Valerie Keast
Program manager

"Ontario is vast, culturally diverse and has always been an agricultural powerhouse. We have amazing soils, water, landscapes, people and technology. The benefit of agritourism is that most activities can be done outside, or in open spaces which allow for physical distancing. I'm a big fan of u-picks because it's active, you get to be on a working farm, and the freshness is hard to beat! It offers good value for money, and you are buying directly from the farmer. I love Hugli's Blueberry Ranch in Pembroke, Ont. It's the largest blueberry farm in Eastern Ontario and in addition to the u-pick, there's a country market and play park for the kids."



Camilo Montoya-Guevara
Research & evaluation officer

"Like many other Ontarians, the lockdown pushed me toward becoming a bit of a camping aficionado. I'm excited to get outside again, explore our provincial parks, and try foods from the diverse regions we have in the province. I'm even planning to go camping at Chutes Provincial Park this summer to try some more products from the Near North and Manitoulin Island. I also recommend taking a road trip to and around Prescott-Russell. It's a cool area which offers a bilingual heritage and range of Franco-Ontarian food specialties. While there, visit Ferme l'artisan, an apple orchard and u-pick farm with a farm store; Vankleek Hill Vineyard and Vergers Villeneuve, where you can try some great wines from the area; and of course, Beau's All Natural Brewing Co."



Caroline Morrow
Senior destination development officer

"Agritourism is an ideal way to understand where your food comes from, support local businesses, and meet the people behind your food. Plus, it usually takes place outside where it's easier to physically distance and stay safe. Woodworker David Schonberger's From Tree to Table Experience in Tillsburg is food tourism gold. It's the perfect bonding activity for a group of adult friends, relatives or coworkers."

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How restaurants are giving back during the pandemic

Despite being one of the hardest hit industries during the pandemic, many restaurants are finding ways to support their communities

Sara Angelucci, *July 31* (detail), 2020, Nocturnal Botanical Ontario series
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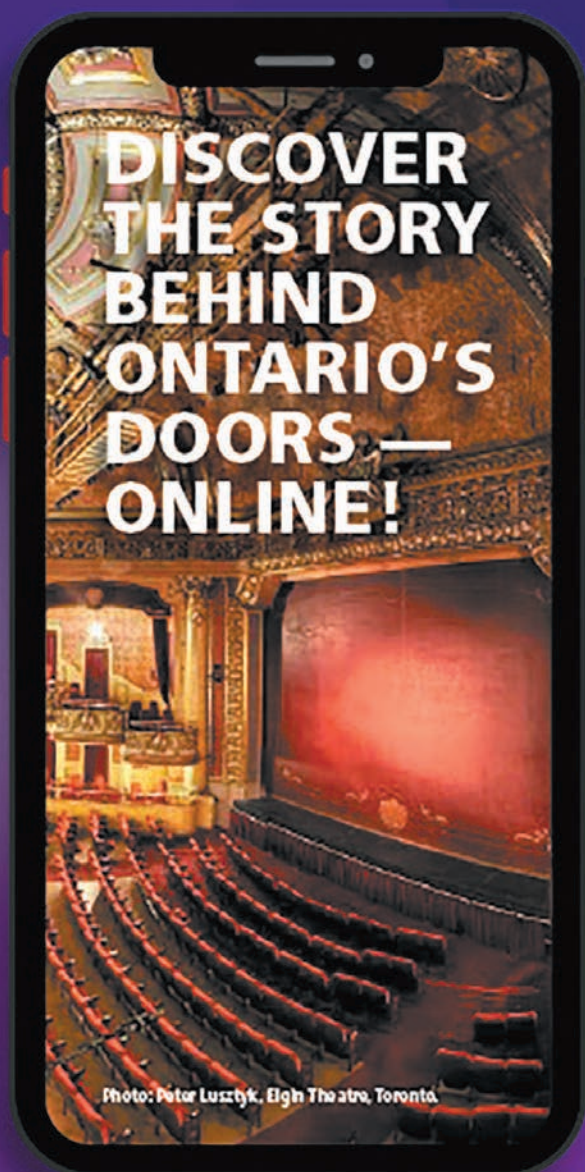
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ABOVE: Plant-based Malaysian dishes by Fat Choi, a vegan restaurant that donates meals to underhoused Torontonians.

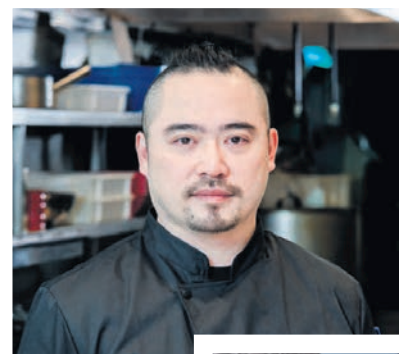
BELOW: Wonton Hut's Eddie Yeung (left) and Brad Heslop of Early Riser Cafe.

This isn't Eddie Yeung's first brush with a coronavirus epidemic. The chef and owner of Wonton Hut, a cozy noodle shop in Markham, was living in Hong Kong in 2003 when SARS plagued China. "We learned in the most difficult way how healthcare professionals sacrifice to fight a virus and keep us safe," he says. In the early weeks of the pandemic when it became clear that COVID-19 was going to be a serious—and long-lasting—challenge, he hatched a plan to support healthcare workers. Yeung and his staff spent their days off preparing nourishing meals from scratch—600 in total—for three local hospitals. The gesture quickly caught on. A delivery company volunteered to deliver the meals and Wonton Hut's customers donated money to help with food costs.

them all the tips that came in. Why, in this difficult time, would he keep giving? "If we have an opportunity and a platform, we can spread the word," he says. "We were seeing that through the donations. Other restaurants wanted to do the same, it was catching on. We can do well by doing good."

Of course, not everyone is able to give money. For some, like Lauren Soo, it's about donating their time and skill. The owner of Fat Choi—a vegan pop-up that operates out of Soos, her family's modern Malaysian brick and mortar restaurant in Toronto—works with Compassion On The Streets, an outreach group that works with the city's underhoused population. She donated 220 meals in January.

Fat Choi only operates on weekends and Soo has found part-time employment as a personal chef.



We're now two lockdowns deep. Many businesses are on the brink, with restaurants among the hardest hit. And yet, communities all over the province can attest to their compassion, especially during the pandemic. Many provide space to facilitate makeshift food banks, some give away food boxes, operate community fridges, feed employees, healthcare workers and seniors for free, while others offer pay-what-you-can format meals and pack breakfasts for kids during school shutdowns.

Restaurant owners are lending a helping hand at a time when food insecurity is peaking. Feed Ontario's 2020 Hunger Report found that food bank use was on the rise even before COVID-19. Just between March and June of 2020, Ontario food banks saw 26 per cent more first-time visitors. And some are realizing that helping others has a positive impact on their businesses, too.

At the start of the first lockdown, Early Riser Cafe, a London mom-and-pop that's been around since the early '90s, was looking for ways to stay afloat—and to help others at the same time. Since buying the restaurant in 2018, Brad Heslop has doled out free holiday meals and worked with local agencies to serve his community. Incorporating ways to give back was a natural reflex. "When COVID hit, everyone was in need and we had to figure out how we could give back with limited resources." The solution was to create an ordering incentive. Ten percent of proceeds and tips went to the local food bank, an initiative that raised over \$3,500 for the organization.

During the second lockdown, Heslop made the difficult decision to temporarily lay off his staff, but gave



But a monetary donation from Dog Tales Rescue & Sanctuary was the catalyst for being able to give that time and talent.

"The whole restaurant situation has been super difficult, but when you look at people who don't have homes, who are stuck in tents, it makes you realize how fortunate you really are," she says. "Even if we can't donate all the time, it's really nice to be able to partner with people when we can."

For Yeung, giving back remains top-of-mind despite the challenge of navigating the ebb and flow of closures. In December, he collaborated with local shops to donate proceeds from jars of house-made chili oil, a 70-year-old recipe passed down from his sifu. He was able to donate \$2,000 to the Parkdale Community Foodbank.

And he encourages his customers to help. Yeung—and other restaurant owners—welcome support from customers. The easiest ways to make a difference are to order frequently, avoid using third-party delivery apps and look up initiatives in your area to see if you can donate or provide support.

Restaurants are an important part of the cultural fabric of our communities and supporting them has never been easier - or more important.

The changing role of museums

Museums are evolving as community builders, agents of change

Today’s museums are no longer just collections of art and artifacts. They are community connectors, educators, engines for societal change. They boost tourism but also reshape cultural narratives. They may not even be housed in a permanent physical space. If they are, many are striving to eradicate their carbon footprint.

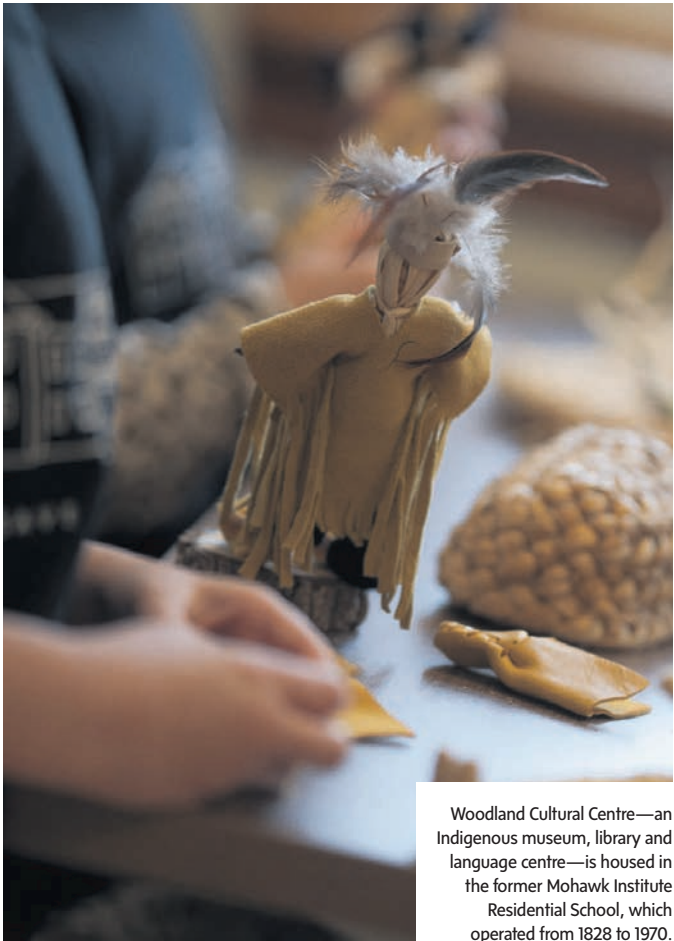
For this year’s International Museum Day, the International Council of Museums adopted the theme, “The Future of Museums: Recover and Reimagine.” Due to the mass disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic—in which ICOM estimates that about 95 per cent of institutions were forced to shut their doors—recovery is a major concern. But as southern Ontario’s museums cope with the ongoing public-health restrictions, they are also looking past the pandemic to their role in the coming years.

Despite the setback, there’s a note of excitement when you speak to museum directors as they describe both their programming now—most of it, by necessity, virtual—and their plans for the future.

Reflecting communities

In Brampton, PAMA (the Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives) is all about holding the mirror up to its communities. As Peel Regional Municipality (which also includes Mississauga and Caledon) grows steadily more diverse, PAMA has worked not only to reflect that, but also to have the communities themselves shape the programming.

“It’s all about engaging with the community and finding out what



Woodland Cultural Centre—an Indigenous museum, library and language centre—is housed in the former Mohawk Institute Residential School, which operated from 1828 to 1970.

their stories are,” says Rene Nand, Peel Region’s manager of community and cultural engagement, “and how we can partner with them to deliver those stories, rather than telling them ourselves.”

PAMA has formed a regular partnership with the Sikh Heritage Month Foundation and, more recently, reached out to the region’s Black community leaders for guidance. “We have a huge Caribbean

population in Peel,” Nand says, that didn’t feel its experience was being depicted at PAMA. The result was a virtual exhibition this past winter, *When Night Stirred at Sea*, featuring contemporary English-speaking Caribbean artists from the islands and the diaspora.

Giving a voice to the marginalized

When it comes to community involvement, the Toronto Ward Museum goes one step further. The museum captures the experiences of the city’s immigrant and marginalized communities by hiring youth from those communities to record the oral histories of its storytellers.

Although it was named after The Ward, the historic inner-city neighbourhood where immigrants settled in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the museum has no bricks-and-mortar home. It makes sense when you consider newcomer populations today are spread widely across the Greater Toronto Area. “Instead of having people come to us, we come to them,” Lupyrypa says.

Its Block by Block program, underwritten by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, allows the museum to train 20 young people as researchers/curators so they can gather material and preserve and present it in multiple media. The current Block by Block project is working in four in-transition neighbourhoods – Agincourt, Victoria Park, Regent Park and Parkdale.

Preserving Indigenous history

At the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, however, they’re very much into buildings. The Indigenous museum, library and language resource centre is housed in the former Mohawk Institute Residential School, which operated from 1828 to 1970. Right now, Woodland is midway through a major capital campaign to fully restore the historic building and transform it into an interpretive centre that will shed light on the residential-school experience.

“It’s a dark chapter in Canada’s history but it’s one that we have to ensure gets told,” says the cultural centre’s executive director, Janis

Monture. “Our survivors say they don’t want this to ever happen to a child again, anywhere.” The plan is to offer guided tours that would allow visitors to see residential-school life through the eyes of its young victims.

Woodland’s Save the Evidence campaign has raised \$12-million so far and needs another \$12-million to complete the restoration and create the interpretive centre, which would open to the public in 2024.

Greening the museum

Ontario’s museums are addressing global warming and other environmental issues in ways both big and small. The Royal Ontario Museum, the province’s—and Canada’s—largest museum, has created a climate-change curatorship to help educate its audiences on the crisis threatening the planet. Funded by ROM supporters Allan and Helaine Shiff, the curator role will build on the museum’s current commitment to environmental programming with exhibitions such as *Great Whales: Up Close and Personal*, opening this summer.

Smaller museums are playing a role, too. PAMA has partnered with Peel’s waste management operations for *Trash Talk*, an exhibition about recycling, sustainability and possible solutions to the residential waste problem.

At the same time, institutions are also trying to reduce their own environmental impact by avoiding plastics, limiting paper use and digitizing written material. “We’re constantly looking at what would be the most efficient and greener way of using our buildings,” Woodland’s Monture says.

Pandemic lessons

The global health crisis pushed many museums into digital programming in a big way. PAMA’s Rand points out the bigger message there is that museums need to deliver their content in different and innovative ways, “from an accessibility point of view but also in terms of preparedness,” she says. “We want to be able to keep going should anything else happen.”

Technology takes a permanent place in museum strategy

Digital content and programs more than an add-on to bricks-and-mortar offerings

If you visited a museum this past year, chances are you didn’t spend it wandering galleries in person. That visit probably took place entirely on your screen in the comfort of your own home.

Shuttered by the COVID-19 pandemic, museums in Ontario and beyond have been pouring energy, time and plenty of creativity into their online and digital offerings to keep visitors engaged. Think virtual field trips and classroom activities, webinars, podcasts, 3-D video games, online art classes, social media storytelling and immersive online tours that almost make you feel like you’re interacting with ancient artifacts, great art or zippy science displays.

“I’m not going to say that digital is the same as going to a museum in person because it’s never going to be,” says Erin Canning, a museum technologist in Toronto and member of the Museum Computer Network board. “But different doesn’t necessarily mean worse. It’s just a different kind of engagement.”

But these days, in-person and digital experiences have more in common than ever as museums stop treating the digital world as a simple add-on to their bricks-and-mortar offerings, says Ryan Dodge, chief digital officer at Ingenium, which operates three Ottawa museums: the Canada Agriculture and Food Museum, the Canada Aviation and Space Museum, and the Canada Science and Technology Museum.

“We’re seeing museums all over the place getting really creative with different types of technology,” he says, explaining that the tech should never overshadow the storytelling, but rather, enhance it. “I think for a long time, it was about the shiny object – the new thing, the VR goggles or Google Glass. But now, museums are really putting experience first, not technology first.”

For example, Ingenium has recently partnered with Algonquin College and its game development program to create a digital choose-your-own-adventure game using a 3-D scan of the inside of a Governor General’s train car. After scanning it, the students worked with the curatorial team to build the story. The game will likely launch this summer.

Other large or iconic Ontario museums have also been busy creating innovative digital experiences. Aga Khan Museum’s homepage proudly displays the tag #MuseumWithout-

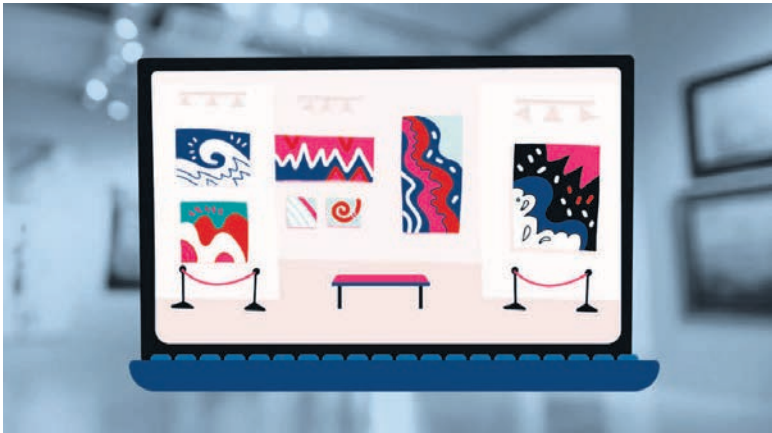
Walls and offers everything from YouTube talks to a new arts and culture podcast called This Being Human. Meanwhile, the Art Gallery of Ontario has a plethora of free online school programs with guest presenters, conversations with artists, film screenings and more.

And while the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont., had to close during lockdown, online visitors can take virtual guided tours with a docent or paint along with artists online in evening classes. Then there’s the Doors Open Ontario experience that takes you behind the doors and onto the trails of heritage sites across the province—virtually. Even smaller museums and galleries are serving up digital experiences. The Peel Art Gallery, Museum + Archives in Brampton, Ont., has online children’s activities and programs for adults, including a virtual book club that explores the arts. Or head north (figuratively) to the Art Gallery of Algoma to check out its impressive art collection.

Paul Kortenaar became the Ontario Science Centre’s CEO just days after the Toronto museum was forced to shut its doors during the first lockdown in 2020. But despite taking the reins at such a challenging time, he knew the museum—an agency of the Government of Ontario—had to stick with its mission and mandate: to help kids and families across the province learn about science in a fun and engaging way. Between March 2020 and 2021, the staff hosted, among other things, 35 “Ask a Scientist” livestream events, delivered virtual programs to more than 600 classes, and garnered over 88,000 views of its home science videos.

No one likes to talk about pandemic silver linings, but Mr. Kortenaar does explain the abrupt push to all-digital content has had an unexpected impact on the museum’s reach. Suddenly, schools that are hours away from Toronto can take virtual field trips to the museum. Viewers around the world are tuning in and finding out what the Ontario Science Centre does. And that’s precisely why the virtual programming won’t be going away after the masks come off in the future, he says.

“If a school in Windsor or Kingston has just discovered they can engage with us in a way they couldn’t before,” he says, “we’re not going to abandon them after COVID is over.”



The pandemic has accelerated creative and innovation online programming at museums across the province.

That Cultural.

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Why distributing food alone won't solve food insecurity

FoodShare's executive director, Paul Taylor, explains the complex reasons for food insecurity and offers up solutions large and small

When FoodShare launched in Toronto in 1985, its mission was to establish food security in underserved communities. Since then, it's come to understand that hunger isn't just a problem to be solved—it's the consequence of structural inequalities that overwhelmingly impact racialized people, recent immigrants and people with disabilities. That's why, 36 years after its launch, the organization now envisions itself as a "food justice organization," says executive director Paul Taylor.

That means it's simultaneously working alongside communities that face chronic underinvestment to create infrastructure for everything from resident-run markets to urban farms while fighting the structural causes of food insecurity. (And by the way, anyone can help! You can choose to donate your Great Taste of Ontario passport check-ins to FoodShare. For every 15 check-ins you redeem, the Culinary Tourism Alliance will donate \$25 to the organization.)

We chatted with Taylor about what really causes food insecurity, how FoodShare is working to solve it and why community gardens can play a role.

What do you see as the cause of food insecurity?

Food insecurity is first and foremost an issue of income. Wages are too low. There was a plan to increase the minimum wage from \$14 per hour to \$15 per hour and that got rolled back.

We have to ask ourselves, why do we uphold systems that make access to food inequitable in a country that ratified the legally binding rights to food? We're under no illusions about the organizing principles: things like racism, white supremacy, colonialism and imperialism. Those are the things that serve as unjust barriers to food access.

Why is the problem of food insecurity difficult to solve in Canada? It doesn't seem to be an issue of supply or distribution.

I think it's really important to acknowledge that there's more than enough food to feed all of the people that live in Canada. Distribution or supply has very little to do with food insecurity. Food insecurity and poverty are only difficult to solve because our governments refuse to make the necessary public policy commitments. What they do instead is double down on emergency food charities. We've seen this inside and outside of the pandemic. Food insecurity and poverty could actually be a thing of the past if our governments made it a priority.

It can be difficult for people to wrap their heads around the enormity of this problem. But there's also an emotional element to hunger and food insecurity, right?

I think if you haven't experienced food insecurity, it's very difficult to understand what it feels like to not know if you're going to be able to feed your child tomorrow. Food insecurity sends a message to people that they're less deserving. If you live in a community with a local farmer's market, you'll see people walking away with their canvas bags

filled with a huge bounty of fresh local produce, fresh bread. Compare that to what's on offer at food banks and where that food historically comes from.

So, when you're talking about the way that food is distributed through FoodShare, that's done in a direct effort to dismantle those kinds of emotions and messages.

Without a doubt. It's folks in those communities who are working with their neighbours to co-design interventions that work for that community. Low-income individuals that are leading and setting up the equivalent to a farmer's market but with a focus on affordable and culturally relevant food.

What does it mean to be a community-led organization?

It's about self-determination. It's about not having someone from another community, who may not have any lived experience of what it's like to be hungry, doling out someone else's leftovers. I think our model really sees it as an opportunity for folks in the community to lead in the way that they've been robbed of for a whole host of reasons.

What do you look for in the local partners you work with?

The types of partners that we're looking to engage are ones that really want to understand why food insecurity exists in this country. A couple of summers ago, we launched the Dismantling White Supremacy Good Food Box. It's a box of produce filled with products primarily or exclusively grown locally by BIPOC growers or BIPOC-run farms. As an organization, we're buying millions of pounds of produce. So, we wanted to disrupt the way that white supremacy works in our food system in as many ways as we can and ensure that we're having some of our dollars go directly to the farmers that we know are more likely to be underrepresented, under-supported, and have more difficulty accessing capital.

During the pandemic, there's been an increase in discussion around the term "food desert," which refers to an area that has limited access to affordable and nutritious food. Where do you stand?

I think we've got to be critical of the term 'food desert.' My friend Karen Washington, an urban farmer and activist in the U.S., calls it 'food apartheid.' She points to the fact that a desert is something that's naturally occurring. What's happening with a lack of access to fresh food in low-income communities is not naturally occurring. There is intentionality behind the disadvantages.

I think we should also be talking about it as a 'food mirage.' With many of Toronto's neighbourhoods rapidly gentrifying, what also ends up happening for low-income folks is that the food that's available to them isn't affordable. There might be a green grocer in that community, but if the folks that want to access it don't have the income that allows them to, it's like they can see it, but they can't touch it. It's not really there.



Community gardens can't solve food insecurity, but are they still a valuable initiative?

Although we can't let our work be positioned as a solution to food insecurity, I think it's really important. Resident-led food infrastructure provides opportunities for people to engage in the joy that many of us associate with growing, cooking, sharing and eating food. These are mechanisms for building community and challenging the systems that otherwise work to isolate us. But as incredible as community gardens are, they don't set the minimum wage.

Land availability aside, what goes into the strategy for choosing locations for gardens?

Food is something that is so wonderful when we get to engage in it. So, we're looking at places where we need to prioritize supporting people to celebrate food. That's what inspired us to start the Sunshine Garden with CAMH, where we worked with inpatients and outpatients and made a market garden right on the hospital grounds. What ends up happening is that those patients are actually supporting the community by providing access to affordable fresh produce.

Do you have a beloved community garden that you visit outside of FoodShare's gardens?

One of the most inspiring and beautiful places that I love to walk to is the Milky Way Garden in Parkdale. It's a garden with predominantly Tibetan gardeners. It's not only a place that folks are growing food, but it's also a vibrant community food asset and a space that's facilitating social connection. It's actually one of the memories I cling to in this time of physical distancing. I look forward to the opportunity to reconnect physically with my community and visit spaces like the Milky Way Garden.

And what are you looking forward to this planting season, especially after how different last year was?

I hope that by at least the parts of the season where we're harvesting, we can be doing that alongside our community. I hope that that kind of activity can happen across the city because we know the incredible power that it has when people are growing food together. You see people beaming from ear to ear when they pull food out of the ground that they grew and offer it to someone they love. That's what I'm really looking forward to — our return to that.

3 Community Gardens That Are Promoting Sustainability

Equal Grounds Community Gardens, Brantford

In Brantford, Equal Grounds Community Gardens takes a slightly different approach to community gardening. Instead of renting out plots, growing areas—including their largest garden, which has 66 beds, a berry patch and 12 fruit trees—are communal. In regular years, seeds and plants are provided to the gardening community and everyone takes part in maintaining and harvesting the produce they've tended to all season. But during COVID, Equal Grounds implemented a new project. Their Host Garden Program supplies home gardeners with seeds and plants to cultivate at home, with the gardeners making the commitment to share produce with their communities or to give back by donating their time to the organization. Underpinning the entire project is the belief that there should be no economic divide when it comes to food.

Medicine Wheel Garden, Toronto

Toronto's Hillcrest Park is home to the city's first Aboriginal community garden. Established in 2012, the garden is planted, cared for and harvested by men from the Na-Me-Res transitional housing program. In addition to the hundreds of pounds of food cultivated there each season, the gardeners also grow ceremonial sweetgrass, tobacco and sage to be used by their Indigenous community. A day of gardening typically begins with a big breakfast prepared from ingredients the volunteers have grown themselves. Reaching beyond their own communities, Mashkiki;aki'ing (as it's known by its Anishinaabemowin name) has become a destination for Toronto school groups who visit the garden to learn about local Indigenous practices as they relate to nature and the Earth.

McQuesten Urban Farm, Hamilton

This city-run program found a home on a disused piece of land once destined to be a roadway. Now, Hamilton's first urban farm has evolved to become a summer 'sprout' camp, a local fresh food market, a healthy food box distributor and the neighbourhood's far superior alternative to the only convenience store within walking distance. Spanning three acres, the farm has transformed the area from what Hamilton's Neighbourhood Development project manager Adam Watson calls a 'food desert' into a community hub where neighbours gather to garden, learn and eat group meals celebrating the fact that this small urban farm puts out 50,000 pounds of food each year.

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How to make the most out of BBQ season

Elevate your at-home grilling experience with Ontario products and produce

BBQ season is just around the corner, and there are many tasty memories to be made. And what better way to do this than by indulging in the highest quality ingredients and products through local farmers, producers, and small businesses that you can support?

Local chefs Taylor Goring and Mai Le dish out some tips and tricks to make this BBQ season the best yet.



How to Grill... Duck

Tips and tricks
Duck has a lot of sinew, which won't break down on a grill, so you'll want to either break the bird into sections for an easier cook or opt for a more tender cut to pop onto the BBQ, like duck breast. If you're choosing to take the former route, wrap the exposed bone with aluminum so that it doesn't burn. If you're going with the latter, you'll want to score the skin and cook it low and slow to give the duck fat, which is quite thick on the duck breast, allowing it to render beautifully. The more you cook duck breast, the gamier its flavour profile becomes: So, it's recommended to cook duck breast to medium-rare with an internal temperature of 135 degrees Fahrenheit for the ideal doneness.

Flavour profile
Le's favourite way to get duck breast going on the grill is by tying up herbs and using it as a brush to baste her duck with garlic and herb oils. Goring recommends letting your duck breast sit in a garlicky marinade overnight and serving it post-grill with brighter citrus, berry or herb-based sauces.

Buy local
Third-generation female farmers lead the flock at this 'farm to fork' operation. At Whitchurch-Stouffville's King Cole Ducks, poultry are raised free-run and live in spacious barns on a controlled diet of natural grains and freshwater.

How to Grill... Chicken

Tips and tricks
When it comes to proteins, chicken is truly a blank canvas that you could do just about anything with. Whatever cut of chicken you decide to grill, both Goring and Le made sure to stress the importance of cooking your chicken thoroughly—it should reach an internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

Flavour profile
Le loves adding Dijon mustard to Greek marinades for a zesty take on a classic flavour. Goring recommends brining your chicken for a minimum of 24 hours in a solution of salt, sugar, water and aromatic herbs before cooking to ensure that whatever route you take, you're left with the juiciest possible bite.

Buy local
Cericola Farms in Bradford, Ont. is an excellent place to source your chicken. Among the first to provide consumers with organic, air-chilled, grain-fed, antibiotic-free, and animal by-product-free chicken, they've mastered the art of producing a high-quality product with ease.

How to Grill... Beef

Tips and tricks
Beef is a staple ingredient at any BBQ. Le loves making Thai beef salad, while Goring's go-to are homemade burgers or kebabs.

Flavour profile
Le uses flank steak in her Thai beef salad, which she seasons with salt and pepper before grilling. She cooks her steak on the rarer side since the acids in the sauce will further cook the steak if it sits a bit before serving. Meanwhile, "if you've opted to make burgers or kebabs with ground beef, try incorporating your mixture with either a panade (a mixture of starch, like bread or panko, and liquid, like milk or stock) or powdered milk to keep your meat moist, tender, and amp up the flavour," Goring says.

Buy local
Penokean Hills Farms in Bruce Mines, Ont. raises its cattle with no added hormones or necessary antibiotics. Their field-pea-based finishing diet makes for meat that retains tenderness and is earthier in flavour than its corn-fed beef counterparts.

How to Grill... Pork

Tips and tricks
Smoky BBQ ribs are a summer must-have, but if you don't have access to a smoker, Goring recommends creating a smoke pouch. Wrap wood chips (two parts dry chips to one part wet, so they don't burn too quickly) in foil. Punch a few holes in the package and place it on the grill over direct fire. This will mimic a smoker; cook the meat for two to three hours and you'll end up with the most tender, fall-off-the-bone ribs you've ever had. You can even opt to finish them directly on the grill with a glaze or sauce of choice for some nice caramelization.

Flavour profile
One of Le's favourite ways to treat pork is to take it back to her roots with Vietnamese flavours and marinades her meat in lemongrass, ginger, garlic, onions, and a bit of sugar and fish sauce. "There's something really beautiful about these flavours fusing with a great cut of pork." She recommends cooking the pork low and slow to avoid burning the sugar and to ensure that the meat is cooked through before you can get a char going.

Buy local
Based on the de Martines Family Farm in Sebringville, Ont., Perth Pork Products grows and sells specialty pork products from rare and heritage breed pigs for butcher shops, restaurants, and consumers across Ontario.

How to Grill... Fruits & Vegetables

Tips and tricks
BBQ season doesn't need to be just about meat. In fact, it shouldn't be. "People need to focus on eating more than just meat. Eat fruits and vegetables with your meat to amplify what's on your plate," Le says.

Flavour profile
Le recommends "grabbing something seasonal, grill it for a bit of char, toss it in olive oil, lemon, salt, pepper and whatever seasoning you want." Or, do like Goring and treat grilled veg "like a warm salad. You're almost flash roasting the vegetables for a delicious medley of flavours. You could even grill the greens in your more traditional salads," he says. And don't forget about fruit. Grilled pears and apples work beautifully with pork, or pair duck with peaches and chicken with grilled citrus and chilies.

Buy local
Check out a local farm stand for fresh, sustainably grown produce—and support small businesses at the same time. Head to Vickie's Veggie's in Prince Edward County for a wide range of produce, including Vickie's signature heirloom tomatoes, or Sideroad Farm in Markdale, Ont. for certified organic veggies and flowers.

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The farm-to-table journey of Ontario cheese



The homegrown story of everyone's favourite savoury snack

THE SUPPLIER:

Hoenhorst Farms Ltd.

It wasn't always Cox Wensink's plan to become a dairy farmer.

"I took a bit of a detour," she says from her family's property in Innerkip, Ont., just north-east of Woodstock. Although she loved growing up on the farm run by her father, she wanted to forge her own path. She studied mechanical engineering at Queen's and product design in Delft, then spent several years working as a consultant in Europe.

But "something always drew me back to the farm," says Wensink, who remembers coming home from university "just to milk a few cows," or drive the tractor during the hay harvest. "In the end, I decided to continue the family tradition, and I'm glad I made that choice. It's a wonderful life."

She took over the day-to-day operations from her parents a few years ago and now spends her days overseeing the production of 32,000 litres of milk and the care of nearly 1,000 Holstein cows.

That number includes the 460 cows who are milked by robots. "The cow decides for herself when she wants to be milked," explains Wensink, "and walks into this box, where she gets some pellets as a treat while this arm swings out from below and attaches the milkers to her." The robot can sense when the cow is done and detaches, leaving her free to amble off, maybe to take a nap. "It's kind of neat, because cows find their own routine," says Wensink, who is passionate about ensuring her cows are happy, relaxed and healthy.

While the setting might be a little different, Wensick says that dairy farming and management consulting aren't all that different. "Farming is always continuously evolving, and you're always looking to improve," she says, adding that this is one of her favourite parts of the job. "I see it as a super-fun, never-ending project."

The most recent improvement—completed in February—has been renovating the young heifer barn, which houses the two- to six-month-old calves who were born on the farm and will one day join the herd. A key change was covering the floor in a layer of straw, which is more

comfortable for the cows. "What's so rewarding about a project like that is you immediately see a change in the animals," says Wensink, noting they appeared even more relaxed than they had been before. "When calves have everything they need, and they know they have nothing to worry about, they start playing," she says, noting they're particularly fond of straw. "They'll gallop around with their tails up in the air, almost like playing tag with each other. It's very cute."

It's also part of what makes her so proud to be an Ontario dairy farmer. "We're held to really high standards," she says, "and it feels good to know you produce a high-quality, nutritious product, the animals are treated well, and you respect the environment. It's nice that when you see an Ontario dairy product in the store, you can tell your friends and family, 'Buy that, we know it's good.'"

THE MAKER:

Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese

Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese, co-owned by Shep Ysselstein and Colleen Bator, makes small-batch cheeses using milk from his brother's cows, who graze in the fields around the cheese factory. "To put it in scope," he says, "it takes us a year to use the amount of milk one of the biggest cheese producers use in a day."

Ysselstein grew up on a dairy farm—the very one that Gunn's Hill sits on now—and always knew he wanted to run his own small business.

Combine his upbringing with Oxford Country's rich history in cheesemaking, a happenstance visit to a cheese factory in Thunder Bay, and the fact that he really likes cheese, pursuing the craft felt like a natural next step.

After stints in the Swiss Alps, Vancouver Island and upstate New York, Ysselstein came home to the family farm and set out to make cheese, including their best-selling Five Brothers, a Swiss-style cow's milk cheese that's also available smoked. (His favourite, though, is their Handeck, aged for two years on cedar planks.)

It's a process that's both short—"if we start at 4 in the morning, we have wheels of cheese by noon," he says—and long, in the sense that you have to wait, often a few months, to see if your cheese is ageing as it should, thanks to the endless variability involved in the process. "The milk, for instance, can change over time. The fat content can slowly be dropping as we head into summer, or their feed could change," explains Ysselstein, who says each wheel of cheese is subtly different. "It's phenomenal how complex the aging process is."



ABOVE: At Hoenhorst Farms Ltd., a progressive dairy farm owned by Cox Wensink, the cows are happy, healthy and relaxed—down to choosing when they want to be milked.

BELOW: Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese makes Swiss-style, small-batch cheese.

THE RESTAURANT:

SixThirtyNine

Owning a Feast On certified restaurant in Oxford County, Eric Boyar always knew he'd have to have cheese on the menu. "It's the dairy capital of Canada," the chef and co-owner of SixThirtyNine says. "It just makes perfect sense for us to use the cheese in our backyard."

Since Boyar opened his farm-to-table restaurant in downtown Woodstock, Ont. in 2005, there's been a mini boom in new cheesemakers in the region, many drawing on the area's rich Dutch heritage to create European-style cheeses. "The people in Oxford County are dedicated to making great quality cheeses, and

they're not just treating it well while they're making it," he says. "Before that, they're making sure the cattle are well looked after, and their properties are well maintained."

One of the perks of Boyar's job is getting to know these cheesemakers and learning about their passion for the craft. "Those conversations solidify the relationship," he says, "but the cheese also just speaks for itself."

One of those newer cheesemakers in Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheeses, who make frequent appearances on SixThirtyNine's menus, which change seasonally. "Shep's aged cheeses are amazing," says Boyar, who's a particular fan of Gunn Hill's Five Brothers Reserve, which is aged

for 18 months. "The flavour is intensified, and it's just that much better of a cheese," he says. "When you bite into it, you get goosebumps."

When Boyar uses cheeses like Gunn's Hill on his menu, whether in pasta, arancini or served on a cheese board, his goal is to let the cheese shine. "You want to centre the dish around the cheese and make it the star of the plate." An example? "With feta, you don't want to cook it too much. But a nice grilled cheese made with Oxford's Harvest?" he suggests, referencing another of Gunn's Hill's cheeses. "That would be phenomenal. Nice and gooey and melty and delicious."





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How food helps Franco-Ontarians stay connected to their culture

Meet two proudly local producers who are working to keep their French heritage alive

It's all about the squeak. That, according to Pascal Robitaille, is how you tell a superior cheese curd from any run-of-the-mill contenders.

"In my opinion, the best curds come from cheddar cheese, because the humidity factor is at about 30 per cent," he says. Any less, no squeak. Any more "and it's soggy, especially when you add the sauce," referring to the combination of fries, gravy and cheese curd we all know as poutine.

If anyone is going to be defining the gold standard for this iconic French-Canadian form of cheese, it's a representative of fromage St. Albert, a dairy cooperative located in a tiny town of the same name (population 500). But it might surprise you to learn that it's actually located in Ontario, not far from the Quebec border.

Ontario is home to Canada's largest French-speaking community outside of Quebec, many of them in Northeastern Ontario. In fact, "The St. Albert cheese factory has been around since 1894, which means we've been making cheese for 127 years," says Robitaille, the company's customer experience director.

Currently co-owned by 32 farmers, some of whom are the fifth or sixth generation descended from the co-op's original founders, St. Albert produced three million pounds of cheese curds in 2020, shipping this quintessential francophone food to stores across Canada. (Pro tip from Robitaille, who, like all employees, gets 200g of free cheese at work every day: If you want to thaw frozen curds, place them in a plastic bag in hot water for 45 seconds and they'll be ready to consume, squeak and all.)

When the original plant burned down in 2013, the co-op decided to add a restaurant, complete with a second floor viewing window onto the cheesemaking floor below. "Obviously, poutine is our number one seller," says Robitaille. "We also have pop curds, which are curds dipped in panko breadcrumbs and fried. They're very good."

When you visit, you'll be greeted in French, and a green-and-white Franco-Ontarian flag flies proudly above the factory. "It's a very, very French place," he says, noting the many

decades of struggle that this area's population had to endure to keep their culture and language alive.

"They've always had to fight, and they're very proud of their French heritage." One of the ways they're keeping that alive at St. Albert is through plans for a cheese expert certification program, not dissimilar to a sommelier training.

Four hundred kilometres to the northwest, on the shores of Lake Nipissing, Mitch Deschatelets is getting ready for the growing season ahead.

"We're getting started on pruning the raspberries, taking the straw off the strawberries, getting the hardy vegetables like carrots in the ground," says Deschatelets, the third generation of his family to work this patch of land, a large-scale pick-your-own known as Leisure Farms, just outside of Sturgeon Falls.

It's the kind of place you go to camp in the summer and snow-mobile across the frozen lake in the winter.

"It's a very friendly community," he says of the surrounding area. "The main language is French. I think it's 84 per cent francophone, and there's also a large Indigenous culture in the area."

The family's French heritage is also obvious in the food they sell at their farm gate store, including meat pies

ABOVE: The St. Albert cheese cooperative is one of the oldest cooperatives in Canada.

BELOW: Poutine isn't just a Canadian favourite—the savoury treat is also an important part of Franco-Ontario culture.



and sucre à la crème, a French take on fudge. Both are made from old family recipes that have been passed down from generation to generation.

"We've seen descendants of families that have been coming since their grandparents brought their parents, and now they're bringing their own kids," he says.

And it's not just visitors; he notes that many locals work at the farm at some stage in their life.

"We get to know our customers. French families are known for being very close, and I think you can see that in how we operate at the farm. We get pretty close to our employees, and we gather over meals." And what better way to connect with Francophone culture than through food - grown and made in Ontario.

First-hand museum experiences irreplicable

Visitors drawn to three-dimensional art and artifacts, say museum directors

Like live performances, a visit to a museum or art gallery can be skillfully replicated online, but nothing beats the real thing. That's why, pre-pandemic, tourists would wait in long queues to enter Paris's Louvre and be in the physical presence of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Even putting aside great art as a bucket-list destination, it's always best appreciated "in person."

of art and what that does, not only intellectually, but also aesthetically. Everything is carefully worked out for an impact." Ironically, he adds, if a show is designed properly, "most viewers won't notice."

Then there's the experience of visiting the museum building itself. It may be an architectural marvel in the middle of a city, like the ROM in Toronto, or an out-of-town retreat whose surroundings enhance a visitor's experience. The McMichael, in Kleinburg, Ont., is tucked within a wooded landscape which evokes the kind of northern Ontario forests painted by the Group of Seven.

Another rural destination, the Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site, near Dresden, Ont., sweeps visitors

back to what was once a 19th-century Black settlement, co-founded by former slave-turned-preacher and author Josiah Henson. The museum includes the restored home of Henson, whose life inspired the classic anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the church where he preached and his family cemetery. You can tour them virtually in the time of COVID, but it's hard to envision life on the settlement without actually being there.



The McMichael Canadian Art Collection museum in Kleinburg, Ont.

"It's three dimensional, it's not two dimensional, that's the point," says Ian Dejardin, executive director of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. "These days we're used to dealing with images on a flat surface, on a screen, but it's not the same."

When you stand in front of one of the classic works in the McMichael's Group of Seven centenary retrospective, *A Like Vision*, you're able to see the texture of the paint, the brushstrokes, the mixture of colours and other techniques that allowed the artist to achieve the overall effect.

Size matters, too. The first thing that strikes visitors to the dinosaur galleries in the Royal Ontario Museum's Michael Lee-Chin Crystal is the sheer enormity of those prehistoric fossils. You could never get that visceral effect virtually. The same wow factor will be in play—public health regulations permitting—this summer, when the ROM opens its *Great Whales: Up Close and Personal* exhibition.

That show includes the full skeletons of a sperm, right and blue whale—the latter almost 30 metres in length. "Talk about trying to understand the wonders of nature," enthuses ROM director and CEO Josh Basseches. "The sense of awe that comes from walking along a skeleton of that size—or looking at the jaws of a sperm whale with eight-inch teeth – has so much more impact when you can do it in the flesh."

How things are presented in a museum or gallery is also an often-unappreciated art. Exhibitions are painstakingly designed, sometimes years in advance, Dejardin says. "Curators spend their lives thinking in terms of juxtapositions of works

"It's a very powerful and very moving site," says Dawson Bridger, manager of public education and community development at the Ontario Heritage Trust. Owned by the trust since 2005, Uncle Tom's Cabin has become one of its most popular attractions in recent years, thanks to the growing interest in Black history. Every Aug. 1 it hosts an Emancipation Day ceremony, marking the abolition of slavery in Canada, that draws a capacity crowd of up to a thousand people. "An event like that is about fostering and celebrating community," Bridger says, noting that museums also play the role of a gathering place.

Jasmina Jovanovic, executive director of the Art Gallery of Algoma, agrees. She says the Sault Ste. Marie-based gallery's best-loved event is its annual Winter Festival of Art. It brings together AGA members in a friendly art competition that attracts submissions from throughout the Algoma District and even the U.S.

The exhibition's opening "is usually our biggest of the year," Jovanovic says. But this year, it had to pivot to Zoom, with a camera roving through the empty gallery, from picture to picture – making for a strangely eerie celebration. The participants were grateful, she says, but it was no substitute for the socializing that normally makes an exhibition opening such an exciting occasion. "At an opening, you talk about the art on the wall, you connect with other people, you exchange your thoughts and feelings," she says.

In fact, while some people enjoy wandering solo through museums, for most it's a social activity. That's why, if for no other reason, museum directors have little doubt that visitors will leave their screens and come flocking back once it's safe to do so. "People are craving that feeling of being together and sharing," Jovanovic says.

Ontario's museums are more than ready for them. Many have exhibitions in preparation, or already installed, for when they can finally fling open their doors again. "Even coming out of COVID, museums are some of the safest indoor spaces in the world," the ROM's Basseches assures. "It's a way to get out of the house, to be with friends, family and children, and get everybody talking."

Lawren Harris, Mountains and Lake, 1929, oil on canvas.



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