

A 'Local' Approach

New restaurant offers a taste of the Comox Valley and Vancouver Island.

The original inhabitants of the Comox Valley recognized the incredible bounty of the land and so named their slice of Island paradise "Komoux," roughly meaning "Land of Plenty." With schools of salmon teeming in the ocean, mushrooms and berries exploding from the forests, great soil and a climate ideal for agriculture, the people of the K'ómoks First Nation were able to thrive off of their land's natural abundance.

Today, in a time where the food on our plates is more likely to come from across the ocean than from the farm down the road, one local chef is making it his mission to re-introduce the concept of local cuisine in a globalized community.

Chef Ronald St. Pierre CCC is the owner of Locals – Food from the Heart of the Island. The Comox Valley's newest restaurant, Locals is also the only one dedicated exclusively to showcasing the local producers that our land still supports.

Originally from St. Pie-de-Bagote, a small farming community in rural Quebec, St. Pierre was amazed at the quality of the Comox Valley's locally produced foods when he arrived here 17 years ago.

"When I came to the Comox Valley, for me it was an eye-opener to see how plentiful the Valley was in food resources," says St. Pierre. "I've seen things I've never seen before coming to the Valley, like getting shrimp that are so fresh you put them in your sink and they're still twitching. Or getting fresh scallops delivered to the restaurant and they're clapping in the sink. For me it was like, 'Wow!'"

"All the fresh stuff from the ocean, everything from the forests, everything that the producers are growing; there's so much and it's all here and it's all available and it's all fresh!"

Locals' menu features a wide selection of that bounty, such as Valley-raised meats, fresh seafood and local mushrooms, vegetables and cheeses. Even the wine list, comprised exclusively of BC wines, includes several selections from the Comox Valley and elsewhere on Vancouver Island.

St. Pierre has no shortage of local goodies from which to choose. The Comox Valley is home to nearly 500 working farms on both land and sea that inject almost \$41 million into the local economy, and the local agriculture sector is only getting stronger. In fact, the amount of agricultural land in the Valley increased 32 per cent last year, according to the Comox Valley Economic Development Society (CVEDS), in a year when most parts of BC saw their agricultural land decrease or remain the same.

Country Guide, Canada's leading agriculture magazine, has even recognized the Comox Valley as one of eight "hot spots in agriculture". While the recognition honors the Valley's wide range of agricultural products, it also recognizes a special attitude toward local food within the community, says CVEDS executive director John Watson.

"Our community works on this culture of food, and it works on this perception that we need to keep the place green," says Watson. "You can talk about fads and 100-mile diets and organics and different things that are important, but what I believe is most important is providing good quality local food to the consumer. We can do that here in the Comox Valley better than is done in other places, and I think our producers are doing it better."

Locals, Watson says, is a great boon to Comox Valley agriculture. "It's the perfect example of bridging the gap between the producer and the consumer," he says. "It's a perfect example of what we could be doing here in the Valley. There are lots of restaurants that are supporting local food, there's no question about it. He's just taken it to the next level."

For St. Pierre, that next level goes beyond simply serving quality local food, and it has a lot to do with the long-term sustainability of the community. His approach embraces everything from supporting local farmers to recycling whenever possible, and he proudly states that Locals donates all of its food waste to a neighbor who uses it to feed her pig. He cites a recent statistic that claims that only three per cent of the food consumed on Vancouver Island is actually produced on the Island.

"When you think about that, it's pretty bad," he says. "If we have an earthquake, or something goes wrong and all communication was to stop, there are a lot of people who would be going hungry."

"On a personal level, I do believe that the population in general should be more aware of their sustainability," he continues. "That's the philosophy of Locals—not only to serve the food but also to be that sort of liaison between the public and the producer, and to raise awareness within the population in general. I think it's still a minority of people who have that awareness. There are about 70,000 people in the Valley, and only about 2,000 a week go to the farmers' market. That's a very small percentage."