

“SHAKE THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOU”

Food CHI launches Value Our Food campaign

“Shake the hand that feeds you”, said author Michael Pollan, who helped popularize the farm-to-fork movement, and an ongoing campaign in Sooke called *Value our Food* aims to get you shaking hands with your local food producers.

Launched by the Sooke Region Food Community Health Initiative (Food CHI) earlier this year, the *Value our Food* initiative will bring food producers into the spotlight with a series of short video vignettes that tell the story behind the market stalls bursting with fresher-than-fresh greens, root veggies, organic eggs and free-range chickens. The video series, created by videographer Kay Lovett, will consist of 15 one-minute shorts introducing local food producers, their specialties, products and stories, with more planned for the future.

“Food CHI, in partnership with the local farming community, is creating an opportunity for residents to better know their food producer,” explains Food CHI president, Anita Wasiuta. The videos currently in production explore the unique significance each farm holds for our community.

The video shorts will feature alongside Food CHI’s popular 2014 Farm Guide listing, offering an intimate glimpse into established farms such as Cross Point Farm, which has remained in the same family and is gearing up to celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2019, as well as newcomers such as the Cast Iron Farms Co-operative, a tight-knit group of young agrarians who recently sealed the deal on the 11-acres of ALR land across from the Sunriver Community Gardens.

“Today, many young farmers are starting up in the Sooke region or actively seeking land in the area to produce food for our residents,” says Wasiuta.

The appetite for buying local is already strong in Sooke, with many local businesses leading the way by proudly adopting a ‘buy local’ model. Indeed, a survey carried out last fall found that an overwhelming 95 percent of Sooke residents who responded say buying food grown locally is an important consideration, and a further 86 percent said they personally know a Sooke Region farmer.

About half of our region’s farmers have been farming for less than five years, according to a separate Food CHI survey aimed at farmers last fall.

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“Farmers traditionally have been generous and helped one another, shared information about crop production and marketing, formed farmers’ institutes, loan institutions, and other kinds of support,” says ALM Farm’s Mary Alice Johnson, who, hard on the heels of the *Value our Food* workshops, hosted the inaugural meeting of the Sooke Farm Club.

Farming can be an isolated lifestyle. Hours are long, the work is physically demanding, and while operating and capital costs increase, farmers struggle to compete with big monocrop farms that can fall back on crop insurance if their crop fails, she explains. Creating those personal connections and network of support is vital to stimulating and sustaining the local market for fresh food.

Food security and how well our region gets to know its farmers is at the core of the multi-pronged *Value Our Food* campaign, which earlier this year offered a series of three business development and skill-building workshops aimed at food producers, market gardeners and residents interested in food security—each workshop featuring an expert facilitator. Topics included niche markets and selecting the right crops, marketing plans, value-adding, and food-growing initiatives.

“As a new farmer and a newcomer to Sooke, the *Value* workshops put on by Sooke Food CHI have been invaluable in providing me with useful information, a beautifully warm welcome and to the farmers’ community, and a great initial understanding of the context of agriculture in the Sooke Region,” says Christiana St. Pierre, of the new Cast Iron Farm.

Funding support for Sooke Region Food CHI’s *Value Our Food* campaign is provided by the District of Sooke, Capital Regional Juan de Fuca Electoral Area, and, in part, by the BC Government’s Buy Local Program; delivered by the Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC with funding from the BC Ministry of Agriculture.

The 2014 Sooke Region Food CHI Farm Guide and vignettes can be found in both map and brochure formats, at sookefoodchi.ca/farm-guide-map. Watch for the Value Our Food booth at events throughout the Sooke region over the summer months.

CUTLINE: *the working hands of Teresa Willman, Silver Cloud Farm*

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