

The Chain Effect of Supporting Local

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Smokey Bear's pork chop

THERE ARE A LOT OF BENEFITS when we purchase from local businesses, namely cycling funds back into our local communities, supporting jobs locally, and reducing environmental impacts.

Supporting local is more than a hashtag, it's a mindset and lifestyle. When we choose to dine at or purchase from a local business that embodies a philosophy of working with and buying from local producers, the chain effect of ordering that one dish can be incredible.

Riley Aitken, chef and owner of Smokey Bear in Edmonton, developed his restaurant around the concept of cooking quality seasonal ingredients over an open flame. Allowing the simplicity of ingredients to shine requires both significant skill in controlling the

temperature and timing, as well as sourcing beautiful, quality ingredients from numerous producers. It is why he began his search for producers a while before Smokey Bear opened.

"Sourcing locally is very important to us at Smokey Bear but it has to come with a standard of quality. Luckily for us there is a group of very skilled and passionate suppliers and producers in Edmonton who we work with," says Chef Aitken.

One such producer is the family-operated Gruger Farms in Nisku, well known in the Edmonton area for growing mushrooms vertically indoors, and which chef says are some of the best mushrooms he's had the pleasure of cooking with. Smokey Bear uses Gruger's most flavourful mushrooms such as Lion's Mane, King Oyster, Pink Oyster,

and Blue Oyster mushrooms. These meaty mushrooms are treated in a variety of different ways - pickled, fermented, and most often, cooked above the maple wood grill so the mushrooms take on the nice smoky flavour.

Rachel Gruger, owner of Gruger Farms says, "The reason we got into this business is that we knew local agriculture would be important to our future. Smokey Bear cares about every ingredient that comes into their kitchen and you feel that when the staff are beaming while they educate you about each dish that comes to your table."

Smokey Bear also uses fresh and cured pork products from Edmonton's Meuwly's. Their sausages, cured meats, pickles, and preserves have been a staple of the Edmonton food scene for the

past few years. The owners of Meuwly's share a similar philosophy to Aitken: that a quality product starts with finding alignment with your producers in standards and values.

"We created Meuwly's because we wanted to bridge the gap between folks in our community and the incredible food being grown and produced all around us," says Keith.

The 'Nduja specifically is made with Bear and Flower's pork belly. Chef Aitken pairs the rich 'Nduja with grilled flatbread and a silky and tangy cultured cream. When a diner at Smokey Bear orders and enjoys this dish, the cost of the dish goes to support Aitken's operations, as well as Meuwly's, Bear and Flower Farms, and not to mention the numerous other Alberta producers who work with each of these three businesses.

"This local purchasing cycle has a ripple effect across the whole food system," says Keith adding, "Furthermore, supporting establishments like Smokey Bear allows producers like Meuwly's and our farm partners to innovate, experiment, and constantly improve. I know that many local farms have started growing unique heritage varieties of vegetables and herbs due to the increasing support from chef-driven restaurants. Diners discover new foods (like 'Nduja!) and start to seek them out at the farmers' market or local grocery stores, which feeds right back into Edmonton's food community."

Stephen Deere opened Modern Steak with the idea that the best beef was available in Calgary's backyard and he wanted to feature this stellar product to diners. With steak being the main focal point of the menu, Deere felt it was critically important to source directly from ranches. When Deere began looking for ranches to partner with, he had a list of strict criteria. Is the beef coming from small family operations? Would Deere and his team be able to meet the ranchers and see the animals? Deere also wanted to find producers who he could get to know, who exemplified a collaborative spirit and pride for their practices and quality.

Meeting Michael Munton, owner of Benchmark Angus and Beef in Warner, Alberta, Deere felt alignment in their philosophies. Munton is a



Modern Steak beef

fourth-generation rancher; his great grandparents began ranching when they came to Southern Alberta in 1912.

Of his ranching philosophy, Munton states, "First and foremost we are environmentalists. You don't ranch for 100 years without looking after our land, our cattle, and our water." He adds, "Equally important is our commitment to our customers. We strive tirelessly to exceed and to deliver the best eating experience to the consumer every single time."

Munton says, "At Benchmark we have coined the phrase, "don't ask where your beef comes from, ask who your beef comes from."

Deere's admiration for Munton's knowledge, passion, and care for the animals and environmental practices guided him to approach Munton about the possibility of collaborating on an exclusive line of beef for Modern Steak. This collaboration led to the purchase of an award-winning bull for over \$80,000, used specifically to breed cattle for Modern Benchmark Black Angus featured on the menu at Modern Steak.

Although steak is a central ingredient at Modern Steak, Deere and his chefs also make it a point to carefully source locally for other ingredients that includes producers like Broxburn Vegetables, Common Crown Brewing, and Deepwater Farms.

Describing why supporting local producers is so important, Deere says, "Buying local is like reading a great novel. As you read, you learn about the characters and you become invested in them. When you're buying local you become invested in the producers, their stories, their products, and magically you get to fall in love. Buying local is a feel-good story."

There is a cascading impact when we dine at a restaurant that embodies a local community mindset. As Rachel Gruger, from Gruger Farms says, "Every dish has a story and behind every story is a real farmer in your community." ●

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Carmen Cheng comes from a long line of food lovers and notorious over-orderers. She loves traveling, learning about different cuisines, and sharing her food adventures on social media.