

## Spread some "Goodness" with Canada's food fighters



**By Brock Weir**

A lot of good comes out of people's ability to access quality food, whether it is health or building a richer community, according to Aurora entrepreneur Chris Neal.

"When people get together around food, whether it is around the dining room table, at a community food centre, or around a garden, good things happen," says Mr. Neal. "There is great conversation, you can talk about family matters, legal issues, immigration issues, or family matters, and food brings people together."

Mr. Neal knows firsthand the "goodness" that comes from food. After all, he and his brother Peter have made names for themselves as the founders of Neil Brothers foods, a growing line of food items that can be found on shelves across the country. For the brothers, Aurora-born-and-bred, their burgeoning food empire started with a simple crouton, but has expanded into much more than that.

Recently, the Neal Brothers celebrated the publication of their first book, simply titled "Goodness: Recipes and Stories," bringing together "as the name suggests" recipes and stories from 37 "good food fighters from across Canada" ranging from celebrity chefs like Jamie Kennedy, to prominent food activists, to frontline workers in food banks ensuring people, regardless of circumstances, simply have something to warm their tummies.

From the start, the Neal Brothers have been very community-minded, contributing to numerous charities and community initiatives in Aurora, the Greater Toronto Area and beyond. From providing product to golf tournaments in the early days of the company, they subsequently became heavily involved in Toronto's The Stop Community Food Pantry "and it was here the idea for the book was born.

"Here was a charity that kind of works in our wheelhouse, we are all about providing healthy alternatives in the different segments we compete in and here is an organization that is all about providing good food to lower-income neighbourhoods," explains Chris, still an Aurora resident. "It really resonated with us."

Those at The Stop later branched out, turning it into the flagship location for Community Food Centres Canada, which has grown to work with over 80 other similarly-focused community organizations across the country. Peter has since joined their National Advisory Board and it was during a brainstorming session around the boardroom table that he threw out the idea of a cookbook.

"He thought, 'maybe we could do a cookbook but have the people involved in the cookbook be those food activists across the

country trying to bring goodness to food, whether they are farmers, activists, chefs or entrepreneurs," says Chris. "There are 37 activists from St. John's to Vancouver Island, across all ethnicities, both genders, and the book has a story about each of these people and what their contribution is to the cause."

Over the process of drafting the book, Chris says he was excited to learn more in-depth about what each participant contributed to their own communities. After their book launch last month, he says he was particularly struck by the work of Ashrafi Ahmed, who is the garden coordinator at the Community Food Centre in Toronto's Regent Park neighbourhood.

"When the book came out she was so thrilled and said, 'I don't think a whole lot of my job and I never thought I would end up in a cookbook,'" Chris recalls. "She was so thrilled to be included, yet it is her work that resonates with everybody. It is because of what she does that people are able to learn about composting and growing. In some of these centres, the growing part of it is what really helps people rally around a conversation, learning about where food should come from, and breaking down the barriers to realising it is not a difficult thing to grow your own food."

Chris and Peter began to grow their own business in the late 1980s. According to Chris, it was the height of the gourmet food craze with mustards, chutneys and red pepper jellies becoming firm fixtures in kitchens across Canada. Looking for a business to start together, they decided to get their hands dirty "metaphorically speaking, of course" in the food industry because there were relatively limited barriers.

From their first croutons, they expanded into tortilla chips with the concept of keeping things focused on organic and natural ingredients and there was no turning back. In addition to their own product lines, they distribute food for other companies with similar philosophies, becoming keepers of "some great Canadian success stories."

"I think anyone in business would tell you that no matter what you're doing you start to feel a sense of responsibility," says Chris. "We are custodians for the products we represent in this market. People are relying on you to help fulfil their dreams and help build their business and it is a pretty big responsibility. It is certainly not one we take lightly."

Nor do they take their responsibility to the concept of "goodness" and the people that make it happen lightly. Goodness: Recipes and Stories retails for \$29.95 and 50% of profits from the book go back towards Community Food Centres Canada. Local customers can find copies at Longo's, Aurora's Maunder's Fine Foods and Newmarket's Nature's Emporium in addition to amazon.ca.