

The Royal: where farmers are the stars

By Constance Scrafield

All the elements that a person loves about the Royal Winter Fair will be there this year, but there will be some real changes to delight this year's visitors.

Marketing manager, Karen Poncelet, told us earlier this week in a telephone interview, "This year, we are more focused on the animals and the great way they contribute to our lives."

This year, the excitement about animals is centred in the President's Choice Royal Animal Theatre, the big news around the Royal this year in many ways. An installation of 2,500 seats, it is an area able to accommodate a large audience and big enough to show off the action the animals will provide.

"It's an actual theatre," Ms Poncelet assured us.

This arrangement replaces and augments both the Super Dogs and the Spirit of the Horse rings. In addition to the dogs, there are the Super Goats - just imagine! Along with the amazing animals come several amazing people.

Sylvia Zerbini, formerly with Cavallia, is bringing her white Arabians to demonstrate her wonderful bond with her equine family. She and they will be performing both in the Animal Theatre, as well as the evening horse shows in the Coliseum.

Gary MacLean, an Australian "Horse Whisperer", will show how simple it is to communicate and work with a horse to calm and train it. His method of communicating with a horse on its own terms will fascinate you.

Victoria Stilwell uses the same basic principal with dogs, once again understanding their mode of communication and adapting herself to that in her version of dog whispering.

Meanwhile, Lauren Borden communicates with all animals on a telepathic level. Do not let yourself be cynical about this. Come and see the lady prove her abilities. It is a gift she has had from childhood and she will surprise the most doubtful.

All these remarkable people will be showing their talents at the Animal Theatre.

Dogs will herd sheep; horse breeders will trot out their equines; Jack Russell Terriers will race; and there will be many more surprises. All the action in the theatre is free of charge and, this year, as Ms Poncelet promised, "Everyone will get a seat."

Ms Poncelet herself is a "loyal Royal person," who has been coming as a visitor to the Royal since she was a child, although she only saw for the first time one of the big international horse shows for which the Royal is famous two years ago.

"I saw an Olympic rider jumping a horse over a huge jump and then over a brick wall - and I couldn't believe it. I told them, you can't imagine how it is for a person to see this for the first time," said Ms Poncelet.

When asked what she did do at the Royal all those years if she did not go to the horse show, she explained, "We came to see all the other animals. We loved the chickens and all the things that go on at the Royal."

The food focus at the Royal this time is on how the food gets to the table.

Too many urban people never consider what it takes for the mountain of food at the supermarkets to actually arrive.

They have no idea about the conditions and labour that is required to raise and bring the crops from the fields and place them within easy reach for purchase and preparation.

There will be the Amazing Food Journey, which will be built like a maze, following this amazing trip of seeds in the ground on the farm to carrots on the plate, as it were.

"There'll be an area called 'Activity' with a sand box full of grain and all sorts of things for children to do to understand how food is grown," Ms Poncelet told us, "and 10 education centres for talking to people who grow the food. They're the real experts. This is For the Love of Food."

Naturally, cooking has been a great part of the Royal for the last few years and it is again this year, with some variations on the theme.

Ms Poncelet explained, "One of the chef challenges has already begun. In four communities around Ontario, there are competitions amongst three restaurants in each city to see and the chef will come to the Royal. They are Brooklyn, Paris, Niagara and Collingwood.

Some major hotels are also competing in the Chef's Challenge

"On the cooking stage," she told us, "the folks from George Brown College are coming for demonstrations but with more participation with the audience. This will be the place for conversations about sustainability."

Naturally, there will be plenty of places to eat and many vendors most willing to get you going with your Christmas (and otherwise) shopping.

An overall three year plan has been put together by the Royal's executives, Gabe Simms, Ms Poncelet and CEO, Sandra Banks. With it, they hope to inspire young people to want to come to this fair, the largest indoor agricultural fair in North America, with a lot of years behind it: a Toronto tradition.

?People should not miss the Royal this year,? Ms Poncelet declared. ?There's a lot that's new. This is like the Olympics of Agriculture.?

Tickets go on sale Thursday on the Royal's website, www.royalfair.org.