

Things get fresher at York Region Food Network

By Brock Weir

Things are getting both fresh and fishy at the Aurora-based York Region Food Network.

Upstream, a new initiative spearheaded by the group, is set to launch as early as next month, aiming to get fresher foods on the tables of people who use food support services, and also to provide some social enterprise along the way.

The program aims to make fresh and healthy food more readily available in the food bank system through hydroponic farming and aquaculture and, when fully launched, will see the York Region Food Network raising their own tilapia and using the water to grow lettuce, herbs, and other greens and veggies in a "closed loop" system.

"It's new and it has been a challenge to get going and we have hit a few snags along the way," says Joan Stonehocker of the York Region Food Network. "We had trouble finding a location, but we finally found one in Newmarket, and we have about 900 square feet of warehouse space.

"The whole idea is to raise the tilapia in large tanks and circulate the water from the fish through grow beds and grow fresh greens, lettuce, and herbs. The lettuce takes about a month to grow in a cycle because things grow really fast because of the fish fertilizer [in the water]. Tilapia has been farmed for 2,500 years so it is a fish that is happy in a crowd. It doesn't require special cold water or hot water. It can live at room temperature or a little bit warmer, and they are particularly suited to being in this schooled environment. They grow quite fast and they taste good!?"

The idea, says Ms. Stonehocker, was first brought to the York Region Food Network "serendipitously" by Richmond Hill resident Stephen Looi who suggested it would be a good way to get fresher food into local food banks. She concedes that many of the non-perishables that currently line the food bank shelves are not the healthiest things going but this could be a step in the right direction.

The initiative got a boost last week from Ontario Centres of Excellence (OCE), which supports community groups on plans to combat poverty head-on. They were one of five programs from Toronto to Ottawa they recognized as socially innovative collaborations.

OCE was founded by the Province in 2011 to develop social innovation connecting "industry, academia, and non-profit organizations and social enterprises to develop socially-innovative products, services, and business models in the areas of health improvement, the environment, and poverty alleviation."

When their first "crops" of fish and greens are ready to go, the York Region Food Network plans on making the finished results available to clients through their Good Food Box program, a monthly initiative where the Food Network sells a small or large box of fresh produce "often supplied from an Innisfil farmer" on the third Thursday of every month to, essentially providing warehouse pricing for freshness to clients throughout the Region.

Some of the rest, however, could find use in restaurants. Their warehouse space, says Ms. Stonehocker, is very close to Main Street, Newmarket so they hope the fish and the greens can be offered for sale to restaurants looking for an "ultra-local" hook for their fare. As the program develops, they hope to continue to expand.

"We think that we have the capacity to produce about 800 heads of romaine every month, so every week we could pull off 200," she says. "We're still learning and writing a business plan. Part of this whole project is to engage at risk youth. One of our partners is Pathways for Children, Youth and Families so they see 2,000 at risk youth a year, so we will work with them to try and find kids who are interested in doing this type of project, so they will be helping with the marketing and the research around who we can sell that to and how we can go from there."