Ontario’s
Local Food Report
2015/16 Edition
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Ontario is an agri-food powerhouse. Our farmers harvest an impressive abundance from our fields and farms, our orchards and our vineyards. And our numerous processors — whether they be bakers, butchers, or brewers — transform that bounty across the value chain into the highest-quality products for consumers. Together, they generate more than $35 billion in GDP and provide more than 781,000 jobs.

That is why supporting the agri-food industry is a crucial component of the Ontario government’s four-part plan for building our province up.

Ontario’s agri-food industry is the cornerstone of our province’s success, and the government recognizes not only its tremendous contributions today, but its potential for growth and success in the future. The 2013 Local Food Act takes that support further, providing the foundation for our Local Food Strategy to help increase demand for Ontario food here at home, create new jobs and enhance the economic contributions of the agri-food industry.

Ontario’s Local Food Strategy outlines three main objectives: to enhance awareness of local food, to increase access to local food and to boost the supply of food produced in Ontario.

In 2015, we focused our efforts on awareness, driven by specific goals to increase the knowledge and usage of local food — known as local food literacy — that have been developed in partnership with Ontarians. This year, we’ll be looking for input as we develop goals for increasing access to local food, and I invite you to be a part of this consultation process.

I also invite you to celebrate the achievements of the past year as outlined in the following Local Food Report — part of our government’s commitment to transparency and accountability. In the pages that follow, we review Ontario’s local food goals, describe the initiatives in motion and highlight our successes. We also showcase a sampling of the many local food initiatives that have sprung up in every corner of the province and the local food champions that are driving them.

I am proud to see more awareness of local food across Ontario. Our food processing sector is experiencing growth — with more and more entrepreneurs and businesses across Ontario starting exciting new agri-food enterprises that are helping to increase “made-in-Ontario” local food options that consumers are asking for. I applaud our local food champions for making this possible, as well as every Ontarian who is reaching for the food grown, harvested and made right here at home.

Jeff Leal

Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
2015/16 in Review

The agri-food sector in Ontario is made up of hundreds of thousands of people: farmers, food and beverage processors, distributors, retailers and restaurateurs. Within those ranks are countless local food champions who drove the local food movement forward in 2015/2016 — from nutrition programs supporting students in Northern Ontario to innovators in Cornwall turning shipping containers into hydroponic farms.

The Government of Ontario was there to support these innovations and ensure the sector continues to grow and develop. By providing funds to an agri-food business incubator for new equipment, working with municipalities to develop their own local food strategies or helping grocery stores highlight their local food offerings, the provincial government has been able to partner with a number of great local food providers to expand opportunities for the people of Ontario.

Funding Summary

Throughout the 2015/16 fiscal year, the Government of Ontario:

- Committed approximately $21 million to over 150 projects through the Local Food Fund, leveraging investments of more than $98 million
- Committed over $6.3 million in funding through Growing Forward 2 to 115 local food projects
- Allocated $6 million to the Greenbelt Fund to support local food initiatives
- Invested over $3.9 million in 21 projects related to local food activities through the Ontario Trillium Foundation
- Committed over $1.1 million to seven local food projects in 2015 through the Rural Economic Development Program to help increase economic competitiveness, innovation and diversity within Ontario’s rural communities
- Invested $2.5 million through the Southwestern Ontario Development Fund in three local food manufacturers to help them acquire new innovative equipment, expand their facilities or increase production capacity
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Achievements

- 175 farmers’ markets are now registered with Farmers’ Markets Ontario
- The Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association boasts approximately 300 members, and this number continues to rise
- 81 per cent of Ontario shoppers can identify Ontario-grown fruits and vegetables in grocery stores
- 52 per cent of principal grocery shoppers in Ontario include locally grown food in at least one meal per day, while 78 per cent eat local food at least once per week

“The local food sector has been identified as a key economic driver in eastern Ontario.”

– Bryan Paterson, Mayor of Kingston & Chair of the Eastern Ontario Mayors’ Committee
Why Local Food Matters

Nothing beats the taste of home, and Ontario produces an abundance of tasty and nutritious food, from vine-ripened tomatoes to mouth-watering prime rib beef to award-winning wines and beers. In total, the province produces over 200 different commodities grown on almost 52,000 farms.

Ontario’s diverse and extensive agri-food sector supports more than 781,000 jobs — approximately one in every nine jobs across the province — and contributes more than $35 billion annually to our GDP. It’s a sector that has shown continual positive growth over the past decade, and that trend continues.

At the 2013 Premier's Agri-Food Summit, Premier Kathleen Wynne saw this growth potential and challenged the agri-food sector to double its annual growth rate and create 120,000 jobs by the year 2020.

In her challenge, the Premier tasked Ontario’s agri-food sector with creating more demand for — and access to — home-grown food to keep jobs and dollars in our communities across the province. She also asked the sector to satisfy the changing tastes and values of Ontario consumers with products such as world crops, organics, foods with added health benefits and artisanal and speciality goods.

The industry responded.

Over the past two years, Ontario’s agri-food sector has added $1.3 billion in GDP and created more than 34,000 jobs. The latest Agri-Food Scorecard shows growth rates have increased since the launch of the challenge in 2013, and according to the Agri-Food Growth Steering Committee — which comprises government leaders and industry experts who advise the Minister on how to best grow the agri-food industry — current data indicates that the industry is well on its way to meeting the 2020 goals.

Over the past two years, Ontario’s agri-food sector has added $1.3 billion in GDP and created more than 34,000 jobs.

“There is an incredible amount of delicious, locally grown and locally made food available right here in Ontario. We all want to buy food that is more sustainable, and cash flow is an important ingredient in every farmer’s sustainability. By choosing to spend our dollars on local food and beverages, we can help make buying local more sustainable for everyone.”

– Carl Heinrich, Chef/Co-Owner Richmond Station; Winner – Top Chef Canada Season 2
What We Want to Achieve

Consumers want to see more locally produced foods in stores, markets and restaurants. The Ontario government has recognized that interest as an excellent opportunity to strengthen the local food sector with more producers, more processors and more innovation — and, as a result, create more jobs for Ontario.

To realize that potential, the Ontario government put together a Local Food Strategy. Developed in consultation with consumers, farmers, processors, retailers, food service providers and not-for-profit organizations, the strategy is built on three pillars:

1. **Consumer awareness and education:**
   Ontario consumers are aware of, value and choose more local foods.

2. **Access to local food:** Local food is identifiable and widely available through a range of distribution channels.

3. **Sufficient supply:** Ontario’s agri-food sector is competitive, productive and responsive to consumer demand.

In 2015, the Ontario government also appointed an Agri-Food Growth Steering Committee, consisting of leaders and experts in government and industry, to help grow the province’s agri-food industry. Its seven recommendations, submitted in October, include:

- Enhanced actions by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) to attract and retain agri-food investments, to grow our domestic market shares and to drive exports.

- Collaboration between OMAFRA and industry partners in developing a plan to build up the competitiveness of Ontario’s agri-food sector, with a strong focus on innovation, scale and modernization.

As you will see in the pages that follow, achieving these local food goals and implementing the Agri-Food Growth Steering Committee’s recommendations requires a multi-pronged approach. It involves funding innovations, investing in our food distribution system, building the capacity of producers and processors and removing barriers to growth.

Another key ingredient in reaching these goals is local food champions: the passionate people and organizations that are putting more local food in schools, featuring local food on restaurant menus, launching markets and food hubs and much more. There are far too many to list, but the Ontario government is proud to support their efforts and pay tribute to a small sample of them in this report.

“The Committee is confident Ontario can build its competitive advantage as a long-term global leader in food production for domestic and international consumption.”

— Amy Cronin, Co-Chair, Agri-Food Growth Steering Committee
Local Food Champion:  
Farm & Food Care Ontario

Farm & Food Care Ontario brings farmers, agricultural professionals, businesses, government and other groups together to support local food.

This not-for-profit educational coalition runs a popular Breakfast on the Farm program. Two thousand visitors participated in the 2015 breakfast at Hylander Farms in Tecumseh, where they had the chance to tour the family-run veal, beef and grain operation, meet the farmers and enjoy an all-Ontario spread of eggs, pancakes, sausage and more.

Farm & Food Care Ontario raises local food awareness in other ways as well, connecting farmers with non-farming audiences through workshops organized through the group’s Real Dirt on Farming Speakers’ Bureau and its Soil Health Roadshow.

On top of that, the coalition is a big booster of Ontario’s Local Food Week. In 2015, it organized and promoted a variety of activities hosted by farmers, organizations, agribusinesses and consumers across the province. Its website www.loveONTfood.ca served as the promotional hub for the 2015 Local Food Week celebrations.
Increasing Awareness

When consumers head to the grocery store, local food choices aren’t always obvious. Many consumers don’t know what grows in Ontario or what produce is available during which seasons. However, market research shows that consumers care where their food comes from.

According to the 2015 Foodland Ontario survey, eight out of 10 Ontario shoppers are likely to purchase fresh, local food.

By educating consumers and clearly identifying local choices, OMAFRA is making it easier to follow through on those intentions.

As part of the Local Food Strategy, Ontario established the following food literacy aspirational goals in early 2015:

• Increase the number of Ontarians who know what local foods are available

• Increase the number of Ontarians who know how and where to obtain local foods

• Increase the number of Ontarians who prepare local food meals for family and friends, and make local food more available through food service providers

Over the past year, Ontario has made important progress towards these goals.

Initiatives & Achievements

In the grocery store

Foodland Ontario is the government’s flagship program helping to increase local food literacy. For nearly 40 years, this program has helped consumers identify food grown in Ontario and appreciate the diversity of our local products — with impressive results. As of 2015, 94 per cent of Ontario shoppers recognize the Foodland Ontario symbol.

Foodland Ontario is using that brand recognition to bring greater awareness to local food options. Since 1977, it has established more than 1,200 logo placement agreements with producers, retailers and food service operators. These agreements make it easier for producers to use the Foodland logo and help Ontario consumers identify locally produced food.

In 2015, Foodland Ontario distributed over 9.5 million pieces of point-of-sale material and information resources to retailers, on-farm markets, farmers’ markets and food service operations. The 135 events it supported across the province attracted over 250,000 attendees, while its public relations efforts generated 1,107 print articles and 201 television appearances, reaching an audience of 34 million.

As of 2015, 94 per cent of Ontario shoppers recognize the Foodland Ontario symbol.

“Awareness of the Foodland Ontario logo is nearly universal among primary grocery shoppers in Ontario.”

– Michael Howell, Associate Vice President, Ipsos Reid Public Affairs
Local Food Champion: Brian Fernandez

Thanks to Orillia resident Brian Fernandez, more people across Ontario will be garnishing their hot dogs and hamburgers this summer with ketchup made from locally grown tomatoes.

French’s ketchup earned significant media attention when Fernandez wrote a Facebook post about his appreciation for the ketchup made with Ontario tomato paste from the Highbury Canco plant in Leamington.

His message sparked a Facebook frenzy that saw his post shared nearly 135,000 times. Grocery stores across the province quickly sold out of French’s ketchup as customers rallied around local food. Since then, French’s has announced potential plans to move production from Ohio to Leamington.

As Fernandez and the legions of other condiment crusaders show, everyday Ontario consumers are ready to step up for local food.
In the community
In 2013, to further highlight the good food and beverages grown and produced throughout the province, the Ontario government declared the first week of June as Local Food Week. In 2015, the celebrations were tastier than ever. Across the province, communities celebrated with events like Picton’s Great Canadian Cheese Festival, Cambridge’s Asparaganza Celebration and the Kawartha Lakes Local Food Forum. Meanwhile, Foodland Ontario and Food Bloggers of Canada took the festivities online with a Local Food Week Twitter Party that included almost 5,000 tweets from 865 contributors, resulting in 12.3 million views.

Eating out
Ontarians spend roughly one third of their food budget eating out. When they do, the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance’s Feast ON program helps them choose local foods by supporting restaurants that serve local food grown and produced in Ontario. The criteria-based program — supported by government funding — recognizes food service businesses that procure local food whenever possible, highlighting Ontario’s unique flavours. From the Burger Revolution in Belleville to Rino’s Kitchen & Ale House in Windsor, more than 100 restaurants across the province now display the Feast ON logo.

Ontario also boasts more than a dozen culinary trails. These self-guided tours offer a tasty way for residents and tourists alike to discover the province’s food and beverage specialties. Visitors can explore orchards, bistro and bakeries on the Blue Mountains Apple Pie Trail, for example, or indulge their cravings for pints and pork on Stratford’s Bacon and Ale Trail.

In schools
The Ontario government recognizes the importance of educating the next generation of local food advocates. Through Local Food Fund grants and transfer payment agreements with organizations such as Farm & Food Care Ontario, we’re helping youth understand where their food comes from and the benefits of eating local.

The Results
With the help of these initiatives, 81 per cent of Ontario shoppers are able to identify Ontario fruits and vegetables in grocery stores, followed by Ontario eggs (65 per cent), Ontario dairy products (58 per cent), Ontario meat (54 per cent) and Ontario baked goods (44 per cent).

Additionally, outside of grocery stores, 53 per cent of shoppers find it easiest to identify Ontario fruits and vegetables, followed by Ontario eggs (43 per cent), Ontario dairy products (39 per cent), Ontario baked goods (37 per cent), and Ontario meat (35 per cent).
Local Food Champion: Algoma Food Network

The Algoma Food Network wants locals to get to know the food produced in their neck of the woods a little better. Run by the Sault Ste. Marie Innovation Centre, the Network promotes local food by connecting consumers, restaurants, caterers, processors, wholesalers and farmers.

One of the ways that they are helping make these connections is through the Buy Algoma, Buy Fresh project, which received support from the Local Food Fund. Whether you’re looking for a nearby producer, market, community supported agriculture (CSA) initiative or café serving up local fare, the searchable online directory will help you find what you’re looking for.

The online platform also provides a venue where like-minded individuals can connect, share information and coordinate local food events. Over the years, those events have included everything from community presentations on sustainable food systems to Edible Algoma: a local food-themed fundraiser dinner for food banks.
Success Stories

A slew of regional initiatives promoting local food have sprung up from one end of Ontario to the other. The City and County of Peterborough is just one example, officially declaring September as its annual Local Food Month. The inaugural celebration in 2015 included tours of local farms, pollinator habitat protection projects and the Lang Pioneer Village Grist Mill — the birthplace of Red Fife Wheat in Canada. Meanwhile, events like Applefest and the Purple Onion Festival kept the festivities going all month long.

Grocery retailers are also on the front lines of local food promotion. Since 1987, OMAFRA has recognized efforts to raise consumer awareness through annual Foodland Ontario Retailer Awards. In 2015, a total of 65 stores received awards for their creative in-store displays and promotions showcasing seasonal offerings grown close to home. Among the winners were Andrew & Emily’s No Frills in Picton, Stewart’s Town & Country Market in Mildmay and the Metro store in Windsor at 6740 Wyandotte Street East.

A number of programs across Ontario are helping people cook with local foods. Markham and East York Agricultural Society received up to $23,257 from the Local Food Fund to support its “Our Local Food” project, which includes a portable demonstration kitchen that can be set up at local festivals, events and fairs.

Thanks to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, more young people in this province will know how to make the perfect Ontario-beef burger, where to find local honey for their homemade granola bars and how to chop an onion from the farmers’ market. The group’s Six by Sixteen food literacy program teaches students how to plan and prepare six meals made with locally sourced ingredients by the time they’re 16 years old.

Similarly, Dairy Farmers of Canada’s Family Kitchen campaign is helping parents pass essential cooking skills on to their children. Supported by Foodland Ontario, the initiative includes a website chock full of easy local food recipes and advice on how to get kids into the kitchen.

In schools, Ontario Agri-Food Education (OAFE) helped Ontario students understand where their food comes from during the fourth annual Canadian Agriculture Literacy Week, held March 1–7, 2015. Programming included curriculum-linked lesson plans and classroom visits from OAFE Teacher Ambassadors.

Ecosource is also taking the local food message into the classroom. Thanks to a grant of up to $138,431 from the Local Food Fund in 2014, the environmental education organization from Mississauga prepared a comprehensive report on barriers and opportunities for local food procurement in schools. In addition, a pilot project also increased access to food literacy programming at several schools across Ontario.

Food literacy is gaining traction at the university level as well. According to the Council of Ontario Universities’ 2015 “Going Greener” report, 96 per cent of campuses have local food initiatives, 86 per cent have a community or teaching garden and 77 per cent have a farmers’ market on campus.

“Celebrating Local Food Week is one way to connect everyone from the farmer to the consumer to celebrate the abundance in Ontario.”

– Jennifer Haley, Executive Director, Veal Farmers of Ontario & Ontario Goat
Spotlight:
Local Food Fund

In November 2015, Ontario announced the final round of funding for its Local Food Fund. The three-year initiative was developed as part of a comprehensive set of programs to help the agri-food industry make an even greater contribution to Ontario’s economic success.

The Local Food Fund supported innovative local food projects that create jobs, increase sales, stimulate new investment and increase awareness and demand for made-in-Ontario foods and beverages.

In Hanover, MacLean’s Ales faced growing demand for its hand-crafted traditional ales. A grant from the Local Food Fund enabled MacLean’s to purchase modern brewing equipment, create jobs and purchase more Ontario-grown hops.

For Lanark County’s Back Forty Artisan Cheese, funding has meant new cheese-making equipment to expand its product lines, creating five new jobs.

Common Ground, a teaching farm outside Hamilton, used funding from the Local Food Fund to launch an Urban Homesteading curriculum, encouraging small-scale production within urban landscapes.

These are just a few examples of the many projects across Ontario that have grown with the help of the Local Food Fund. In total, the Local Food Fund committed approximately $21 million to over 150 recipients and leveraged an investment of more than $98 million.

“The Local Food Fund is helping us not only support Ontario farmers, but is giving us the opportunity to create innovative ways of connecting with partners and customers.”

– Rosanne Longo, Spokesperson and Brand Ambassador, Longo’s
Increasing Access

The easier it is to buy local, the more Ontario poultry, pies, fruits and vegetables we’ll see at the dinner table. This is why increasing access to local food throughout the province is one of the pillars of the Local Food Strategy.

Specific goals for increasing access are currently being developed, but Ontario is already making significant progress on the ground.

Bustling farmers’ markets are expanding to keep up with demand, and more and more community supported agriculture (CSA) organizations are now operating year-round.

Building on these successes strengthens Ontario’s local food distribution systems and helps find innovative ways to deliver more made-in-Ontario choices to consumers. In the end, buying and eating local food should be simple — whether it’s making a trip to the grocery store, browsing the stalls at a farmers’ market, signing up for a CSA, or stopping at a roadside stand on your way home from work.

When Ontarians hit those markets last year, many picked up a bottle of wine along with their produce, meat and baked goods. To date, 84 wineries and 215 farmers’ markets have participated in a pilot program to sell VQA wines at select farmers’ markets, generating more than $1.4 million in sales. The program provides local wineries with the opportunity to create jobs, drive tourism and stimulate the local economy, all while increasing access to local wine for Ontario consumers.

Last year also wrapped up the third year of a pilot project to set up farmers’ markets at select ONroute service centres along Highway 401. The venture, led by Farmers’ Markets Ontario, gave travellers a convenient way to enjoy the bounty of local farms. In 2015, these markets attracted 185,000 visitors.

Initiatives & Achievements

On the farm
An estimated 1,200 on-farm markets, roadside stalls, pick-your-own programs, and community supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives across the province are bringing local food to Ontarians.

At the market
Farmers’ Markets Ontario (FMO), an OMAFRA-funded organization dedicated to growing and supporting markets across the province, saw 11 new member markets open and registered a 242-day increase in additional farmers’ market shopping days in Ontario in 2015.

In 2015, the farmers’ markets at select ONroute service centres attracted 185,000 visitors

Inside Ontario’s broader public sector
On October 8, 2015, the Ontario government announced $6 million over three years to support local food projects through the Greenbelt’s Local Food Investment Fund. In addition to building capacity province wide, the non-profit organization is using these dollars to increase local food purchases by public sector organizations and institutions.
Local Food Champion: Steffen Marin

With a menu that boasts homemade duck perogies, Vietnamese tempura hot dogs and homegrown eggplant dumplings, Heirloom is not your average food truck. But judging by the line-ups, that’s exactly what many Torontonians are hungry for.

The exotic offerings aren’t the only things that set owner Steffen Marin apart from his competition. The 23-year-old chef bases his menu on what fresh, organic and seasonal ingredients are available from his own garden plots and from the producers he partners with in the surrounding area.

Marin, a graduate of Fanshawe College’s artisanal culinary arts program, loves local food not only for its taste but also for its smaller environmental footprint. He launched Heirloom in 2015 with the aim of bringing sustainable food to the streets of Toronto. Since then, his farm-to-truck philosophy has been a hit at dozens of festivals and events, from catered parties to the TO Foodfest to the Tragically Hip’s 2015 concert at the Molson Canadian Amphitheatre.
On October 8, 2015, the Ontario government announced $6 million over three years to support local food projects through the Greenbelt’s Local Food Investment Fund

Ontario’s Local Food Procurement Policy requires government ministries and agencies to explore local food options for procurements of less than $25,000. As in previous years, this policy was applied at the 11th annual Premier’s Summit on Agri-Food in November 2015, where all food served was sourced from Ontario producers.

New opportunities for wine, cider and craft beer
Following the historic introduction of beer in grocery stores in December 2015, the Ontario government has helped to increase choice and convenience for consumers and to support fruit wine and cider producers by making Ontario wines available in grocery stores. Wines, including world-class VQA brands and Ontario fruit wines, will be available in up to 300 independent and large grocery stores, and Ontario ciders will be available at up to 450 grocery stores.

The Ontario government also introduced the sale of 100 per cent Ontario fruit wines and craft cider at farmers’ markets, benefiting the province’s 19 craft cideries and over 40 wineries that produce fruit wines.

The LCBO also launched the first of 25 Craft Beer Zones in its stores in September 2015, enhancing market exposure for Ontario’s smaller breweries. Consumers are snapping it up. Craft beer is the LCBO’s fastest growing beer category, with sales up 36 per cent in 2014/2015 from the previous year.

The Results
According to the 2015 Foodland Ontario Survey, of meals prepared at home, 52 per cent of principal grocery shoppers in Ontario include local food in at least one meal per day, while 78 per cent include local food in at least one meal a week.
Local Food Champion: 
Joshna Maharaj

Joshna Maharaj may be a renowned local food activist here in Ontario, but her passion for the cause took root halfway around the world. After graduating from McMaster University in 2000, she spent a year living on an ashram in India where she helped out in the kitchen.

That experience sparked a love affair for fresh, nutritious food that’s been burning brightly ever since. Returning home, Maharaj enrolled in cooking school and then put her culinary skills to work for a number of different organizations.

In 2011, she took on the challenge of refreshing Scarborough Hospital’s patient menu, adding more locally sourced ingredients and expanding its cultural diversity. At Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children, she put more local food on the cafeteria menu, established a weekly farmers’ market and ran lunch ‘n’ learn seminars on food topics.

Most recently, Maharaj served as executive chef and assistant director at Ryerson University’s food services, significantly boosting the amount of sustainable, local food on campus. “We grow beautiful food in Ontario,” she says. “And we should all celebrate that more than we do.”
Success Stories

What is the best way to get more local food onto Ontario dinner tables? With support of up to $102,800 from the Local Food Fund, Fresh City Farms has expanded distribution. The urban farm organization teamed up with 100 km Foods Inc. and Stasis Preserves to share a 10,000-square-foot warehouse space in Toronto. The venture provides dry and cold storage space to local food businesses and gives small-scale producers and processors in the Golden Horseshoe area greater access to the Toronto market.

And in Guelph, the Seed Community Food Hub Project is bringing a local flavour to food access with the help of a $267,300 grant from the Trillium Foundation. The community initiative is establishing a cold storage facility and distribution centre to increase access to fresh, local food, providing healthy food education programs and running a community kitchen and garden.

Meanwhile, several initiatives are helping students enjoy homegrown food. FreshTech Processors Inc. received up to $206,800 from the Local Food Fund to create a real-time e-commerce system, allowing community agencies and student nutrition programs to buy perishable food products directly from local farmers, growers and processors.

The Ontario Student Nutrition Program is helping to bring nutritious breakfast, snack and lunch programs to schools and community locations across the province. The program operates in partnership with local community organizations. During the 2014/15 school year, the program helped provide nutritious meals and snacks to more than 847,900 school-age children and youth.

Since 2013, the province has invested an additional $14.4 million through the Healthy Kids Strategy and the Poverty Reduction Strategy to expand and enhance Ontario’s Student Nutrition Program, including more than $4 million to support student nutrition programs in First Nations educational settings. As of January 2016, the program was expanded to or enhanced in approximately 120 educational sites, including schools and other on-reserve locations in 63 First Nations communities.

Schools aren’t the only institutions buying local. Sustain Ontario recently launched an online toolkit that helps municipalities and institutions craft local, sustainable procurement policies and programs. And local food is on the menu for more and more patients across the province, thanks to Brantford-based MEALsource. Recognized in 2012 as a Greenbelt Fund Local Food Champion, the non-profit is helping Ontario farmers and distributors gain market access to public sector institutions. Each year, the group-buying program facilitates $16 million worth of local food purchases for 33 health-care food service operations across Ontario. MEALsource is now joining forces with VG Meats, a meat producer-processor in Simcoe and winner of the 2015 Premier’s Award for Agri-food Innovation Excellence. Together, they are bringing protein-packed beef — produced and processed locally — to MEALsource members across the province, maximizing the value of public procurement.

“\textit{It is great to see Ontario investing in food production companies in my riding of Oak Ridges – Markham. These investments to local businesses support our farmers and our communities, and assist in creating and supporting local jobs.}”

– Dr. Helena Jaczek, MPP for Oak Ridges – Markham
Local Food Champion: Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre

May 1, 2015, marked the grand opening of the state-of-the-art Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre — the first of its kind in Ontario. The Colborne facility boasts a fruit and vegetable processing room, packaging and labelling equipment, cold and dry storage space, on-site business support services for producers and a fully equipped commercial kitchen for flash freezing, cooking and baking.

In 2012, OMAFRA’s Business Retention and Expansion program partnered with communities in Eastern Ontario to conduct a pilot local food survey that identified the need for this type of facility. The survey is now available to all Ontario communities that would like to build their local food economy using the Business Retention and Expansion program.

Ontario has since continued its support for the Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre by investing $159,000 through the Ontario Trillium Foundation and more than $500,000 through two Local Food Fund grants for equipment, marketing and training costs.
Increasing Supply and Sales

From beef to beans to baby bok choy, Ontario farmers produce more than 200 diverse agricultural commodities. In doing so, they also play a pivotal role in our economy. In 2014, primary production (crops and livestock) employed more than 81,000 people and represented more than $4 billion of the province’s GDP.

Much of this bounty makes its way to consumers in fresh, unprocessed form. But an even greater proportion — approximately 65 per cent — is purchased by local food processors, adding value and creating jobs here in Ontario.

Cheesemakers turn milk into award-winning Asiagos, Ricottas and Lankaaesters. Microbrewers and bakeries transform homegrown grains into world-class pilsners and pastries. And butchers supply restaurants with mouth-watering burgers made from Ontario beef.

Innovative processors are creating must-try snacks and beverages, from kale chips to maple chipotle pecans. Meanwhile, more and more businesses are helping busy families eat local with grab-and-go soups, curries and other made-in-Ontario meals.

Some are artisanal operations, while others are large-scale processors. Either way, they are contributing to the provincial economy. Food and beverage manufacturing employed more than 95,000 Ontarians and contributed nearly $12 billion in GDP in 2014.

Initiatives & Achievements

According to the 2015 Agri-Food Scorecard, GDP for Ontario’s agri-food sector is up 1.6 per cent, while employment is up 2.2 per cent. We have seen real growth in the processing sector, with the government helping to attract $331.5 million in investment.

Part of that success can be attributed to government funding programs such as Growing Forward 2, the Eastern Ontario Development Fund and the Southwestern Ontario Development Fund. These programs support projects that include local food initiatives.

Ontario’s food processing sector is growing — in 2015/16 the government helped to attract $331.5 million in investment.

Others, like the Local Food Fund, focus exclusively on the agri-food industry. This fund has supported many projects aimed at boosting the supply and sales of local food, and wrapped up in 2015.
Spotlight: Community Food Donation Programs

When it comes to supporting families in need, Ontario’s farmers have always been generous. Since 1998, Ontario Pork Producers have supported the province’s food banks through their “donate-a-hog” program.

Meanwhile, dairy farmers donate an average of more than a million litres of milk each year, and the Ontario Beef Program has provided more than 45,000 servings of fresh beef since its launch in 2014.

The Egg Farmers of Ontario have contributed 12,000 dozen eggs each month, while the Chicken Farmers of Ontario provide approximately 100,000 chickens.

Those donations matter. According to the Ontario Association of Food Banks, almost 360,000 individuals in this province turn to food banks each month, roughly a third of them children.

To support the important partnerships between farmers and food banks, Ontario introduced a new Food Donation Tax Credit in 2014. Now, farmers who give to eligible community food programs receive a tax credit for 25 per cent for the fair market value of the agricultural products they donate. The first of its kind in Canada, the program supports farmers, drives local economic growth and helps ensure families have access to healthy, local food options.
Ontario’s Wine and Grape Strategy, renewed in 2013, has committed up to $75 million to the local wine and grape industry over five years. These funds support vineyard improvements, research, marketing, innovation, productivity and increased sales of Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA) wines.

In January 2015, as part of the $2.7 billion Jobs and Prosperity Fund, the Ontario government launched the Food and Beverage Growth Fund which will provide $400 million over 10 years to help agri-food processors expand operations and create jobs. In 2015, the fund provided $7.5 million in grants to Ontario food processors.

In 2015, the Ontario government’s Food and Beverage Growth Fund (part of the Jobs and Prosperity Fund) provided $7.5 million in grants to Ontario food processors.

The Ontario government is also working to enhance local food production and processing by building capacity. OMAFRA’s 2015 Guide to Food and Beverage Manufacturing in Ontario offers comprehensive information on starting or growing a food business, including information on business plans, insurance, financing, prototype testing, product pricing, food safety, packaging and more.

OMAFRA’s Regional Advisory Services also offer valuable expertise, whether it’s helping a rural community develop a strategic plan, connecting an agri-business with the right people or equipping a new food cooperative with resources on board governance.

The Ontario government also supports capacity-building events like the fifth annual Eastern Ontario Local Food Conference, which took place in Belleville on November 4-5, 2015. The agenda included a local food tour, a farmer/retailer roundtable and panels on collaboration, urban agriculture and emerging market opportunities.

“The grant we received through the Ontario government will enable us to modernize our operations and, ultimately, expand our market share.”

– Graham Spence, Co-owner, Block Three Brewing Company Ltd.
Local Food Champion: Greenbelt Fund

Since its launch in 2010, the Greenbelt Fund has supported local food initiatives across the province. This non-profit organization has invested in nearly 100 projects, including enabling hospitals to serve up more local food, helping craft brewers get their hands on home-grown hops and bringing First Nations communities greater access to Ontario meat.

Those investments are paying off. Every dollar from these grants increases local food sales by $13. The Ontario government has supported the Greenbelt Fund since its inception, providing $8.6 million towards 111 projects that have generated over $110 million in local food sales.

To build on those significant returns, Ontario has allocated an additional $6 million to the Greenbelt Fund to support local food initiatives. This investment supports projects to increase local food procurement within the broader public sector, increase market access for small and mid-sized firms and processors and improve understanding of where local food can be found, what local foods are available and how to use them. It will also support the development of new tools on Ontariofresh.ca — the Greenbelt Fund’s online community and database that connects more than 2,500 local food buyers, processors and sellers across the province.

Together, we’ll continue to connect farmers to new markets and bring more locally grown options to our long-term care facilities, daycares, schools and other public institutions.
The Results

According to Restaurants Canada’s 2015 chef survey, local food ranks second only to craft beers and microbrews as the year’s hottest trend. And the trend is continuing to grow in Ontario.

Since 2013, nearly 300 schools have participated in Fresh from the Farm, distributing almost 750,000 kilograms of fresh Ontario fruits and vegetables.

In 2015, 84 wineries sold VQA wines at more than 200 farmers’ markets across the province, generating more than $1.4 million in sales revenue.

In 2015, total farm sales of field vegetables (e.g., beans, carrots, spinach, etc.) increased by about eight per cent from $375.6 million in 2014 to $405.6 million in 2015. Similarly, total farm sales of Ontario’s greenhouse vegetables (tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers) increased by approximately two per cent from $812.4 million in 2014 to $829.8 million in 2015.

175 registered farmers’ markets and 300 registered members of Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association, including on-farm markets and community supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives, are contributing to increasing the supply and sales of locally grown food.
Local Food Champion: Fresh from the Farm

2015 was a bumper year for Fresh from the Farm, an innovative program that helps schools raise funds by selling local apples, carrots, onions, potatoes and more.

Since 2013, nearly 300 schools have participated in this program, distributing almost 750,000 pounds of fresh Ontario fruits and vegetables. Those efforts have yielded more than $274,000 for school initiatives and $382,000 for Ontario farmers. Last year was the biggest year yet for the program, with students selling 465,000 pounds of Ontario produce — nearly triple the volume from the previous year!

Fresh from the Farm is a partnership between the Ontario Ministry of Education, OMAFRA, Dietitians of Canada and the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers’ Association. Given the program’s impressive success to date, plans are in place to deliver year four of Fresh from the Farm to over 50 school boards and 4,000 schools across the province in 2016/17, and to all Ontario publicly funded schools by 2017/18.
Success Stories

Every day, innovators across the province are pioneering new approaches to local food. The Premier’s Awards for Agri-Food Innovation Excellence recognize these out-of-the-box thinkers, and the 2015 recipients proved once again how inventive Ontarians can be.

Vineland Estate Winery’s new optical sorter scans 2,000 grapes per second, gently de-stems the fruit and separates out unwanted material. The innovation promises to revolutionize winemaking in Ontario, delivering high-quality grapes in a fraction of the time it takes to do it by hand.

In downtown Cornwall, Smart Greens has converted a 320-square-foot shipping container into a hydroponic “farm.” Inside the insulated, climate-controlled container, the company produces more than 3,000 leafy greens, herbs and peppers each week. Now it’s franchising the brand, with the goal of seeing 50 similar shipping containers across Canada over the next five years — giving urban Canadians access to fresh, local greens 12 months of the year.

A number of provincial funding programs are also helping agri-food companies compete and scale up operations.

With support from the Local Food Fund, Premier’s Award winner Clear Valley Hops near Collingwood has purchased an increased capacity lacerator. As a result, the grower can dry its artisanal hops at a low heat and then pelletize, package and flash freeze them — all within 24 hours of harvest. Thanks to this project, brewers in Ontario now have a local option for first-rate brewing ingredients.

“We’ve got tons of start-ups riding on the back of consumer demand for local, artisanal food.”

– Norm Beal, CEO, Food and Beverage Ontario
Local Food Champion: 
Purvis Brothers Limited

Since 1882, the Purvis family has fished the cool waters of Lake Huron, bringing fresh whitefish, lake trout, herring and sturgeon to Ontario consumers. The proud family business has seen many changes over the span of five generations, as modern fishing vessels replaced steam tugboats and refrigerated trucks took over from the ice-packed railway cars that once transported its haul to market.

Now, the Manitoulin Island fishery begins a new chapter in its long history, thanks in part to a grant from Ontario’s Local Food Fund for up to $28,350. The investment allowed Purvis Brothers to purchase and install new refrigeration equipment. The upgrade is poised to make a big splash, increasing Northern Ontario commercial fishing by an additional one million pounds per year.
The Local Food Fund also supported Norfolk County-based **Nightingale Farms Limited** with up to $287,900 to install equipment and train operators for packaging product lines such as beans, peas, okra, organic peppers and zucchini.

Thanks to the **Rural Economic Development (RED) program**, local Chatham meat processor **Schinkel’s Legacy** is increasing efficiencies, creating new jobs, improving food safety and minimizing waste. With an investment of up to $102,125, Schinkel’s Legacy will be able to install advanced automation technologies which will help enhance the company’s production capacity, satisfying growing demand for its award-winning hams, sausages, kielbasas and other deli products.

The RED program is also supporting more great wine. **Sandbanks Estate Winery** is well known for its Baco Noir, Cabernet Merlot, Shiraz and more. With an investment of up to $45,000, the Prince Edward County winery is expanding its sales and developing innovative new products from local grapes. Not only is that great news for wine lovers, it’s also great news for the local economy.

“Government programs like the Local Food Fund help create awareness around local food and the importance of it, and provide family farms encouragement and motivation to continue to supply great local food.”

– Nancy DeFilippis-Sampogna, Top Tomato Foods
The Future of Local Food

Local food in Ontario is thriving with increased investment in production, expanded distribution and greater consumer awareness. It all adds up to a solid foundation that the local food sector can build upon in the months and years ahead. By increasing the awareness, access and supply of local food, the Ontario government will help to continue to grow the sector, create more jobs and ensure more Ontario consumers are eating fresh, high-quality local products.

The Local Food Strategy will also increase local food literacy at home and in the classroom, and help promote healthy eating — one of the pillars of Ontario’s Healthy Kids Strategy. Promoting and using foods grown, harvested and made in Ontario also supports a sustainable and climate smart agriculture and food sector.

But the provincial government can’t do it alone.

Ontario will continue to rely on local food champions, partners, entrepreneurs and industry leaders to achieve this vision. In 2016, the government will continue to engage the whole sector to develop specific goals for enhancing access to local food.

The programs and investments outlined in this report will continue to put more local food in pantries, markets and restaurants across Ontario, and the Ontario government remains committed to reporting on the progress Ontario is making to help reach the goals of the Local Food Strategy.