



AARON VINCENT ELKAIM FOR THE TORONTO STAR

As part of an Ontario program to build connections between local farmers and high-end food purveyors, Tom and Janet Chapman have chef Roger Mooking, right, sample roasted turkey. The Chapmans raise exotic breeds in a stress-free environment at Maple Lane Heritage Turkeys.

# Local farmers, chefs kindle a slow-burning love affair

LOCAL from L1

and 12 farmers and food producers, have signed up to woo each other.

They are looking for relationships, but not the romantic kind.

Chefs want to cook local food. Farmers want to sell it.

Chefs are busy in the kitchen, farmers in the fields.

They need this sort of matchmaking to find compatible partners.

At 35, Mooking is one of the busiest and hottest food personalities in Toronto. He's executive chef and co-owner of restos Nyood and Kultura, as well as hosting the Food Network show *Everyday Exotic*.

Mooking says about 40 per cent of the food he uses is local. He'd like it to be more. What stands in the way? "Scale and size, and delivery times."

He is lured to Janet Chapman by the wafting scent of the warm roasted turkey she is unwrapping. A tidbit of tender turkey breast is his reward. Chapman and her husband, Tom, raise Maple Lane Heritage Turkeys.

Their exotic breeds, such as black

turkeys, peck and wander "stress-free."

The breast is exceptionally juicy. "It's almost self-basting," Tom says.

He tells Mooking sad tales of commercial turkeys falling under the weight of their own breasts and weak hearts, too heavy to mate naturally.

The Chapmans' turkeys actually fly. They won't make it to Florida for the winter, but they can get up a tree or flap away far enough to land in the clutches of predators.

Tom says minks in the neighbourhood will rip open the back of a turkey's head and drink the blood for hours.

This is speed-dating on country time. No bells or buzzers. No hustling of interested parties from one station to the next. Just slo-mo chats.

James Greaves has the slow cooker going, ready to dole out chunks of meltingly tender brisket in two-bite pitas.

It's Algonquin Angus, dry-aged, AAA beef raised in the slow food lifestyle. Greaves accounts for the

animals "from pasture to plate," every cut traced by its serial number.

Greaves loves his land, farmed since 1929 by his father and grandfather before him. "It took that long to get a consistent product," he tells Mooking. He invites him on a farm tour.

Consistency is a big draw. What else do chefs want in a relationship? Reliability. Quality. A good price.

They don't want to buy in bulk or freeze food. But the larger or more corporate the restaurant, the tougher it is to source local food in sufficient quantities.

What do farmers want? A commitment. A fair price. A bit of understanding as they grapple with uncertain lead times, weather, crop blights and international competition.

Local farmers have the freshness advantage, but live in a crazy world where cucumbers from China can be cheaper than homegrown.

It can take years to build up enough contacts to fill a local-centred menu. Jonathan Gushue, executive chef of Langdon Hall, has re-

cently turned for help to a professional "forager" with a central depot. Langdon Hall is a century-old luxury hotel and spa in Cambridge, Ont.

"I don't know why I have to wait so often and so long to get one thing," he tells an audience in a warm-up to the speed-dating.

There's a third partner in the relationship between chefs and farmers — the diner. We live in a want-it-all-and-want-it-now society. We are used to cheap, plentiful food. And if we want strawberries on the breakfast buffet in deep winter, restaurateurs are hard pressed to deny us. A farmer in the audience complains that consumers are "selfish" and "spoiled."

Still, Gushue does see a good trend. More menus are specifying origins because local food is a draw.

Gushue says 30 to 40 per cent of his customers are now asking, "Where's it from?"

The bad news: "As for paying more, I'd say no — they don't want to do that."

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