

# Eating local: 'fresher, tastier, healthier'

By RICHARD LEITNER

NEWS STAFF

Doug Fletcher says he's "not condemning" the new Hamilton Eat Local food map — which is a good thing because his family's Glanbrook farm is among 65 the second annual edition promotes.

But his less-than-effusive praise betrays the clear frustration he feels about the tightening economic noose around farmers' necks.

As he proudly points out, Fletcher's Fruit Farm grows apples and pears and "nothing else" — albeit more than 20 varieties of former and eight of the latter.

It's been doing so since 1866 — a year before Canada became a country — on the 80-acre Fletcher Road farm established by his great grandfather.

But the future of his family's pear business is now in serious jeopardy thanks to the looming closure CanGro Foods Inc.'s fruit-canning plant in St. Davids at the end of June — reportedly the last one this side of the Rocky Mountains.

If that weren't stressful enough, he's been forced to relocate his market stall from Centre Mall after 48 years and is now part of the Ottawa Street Farmers' Market, which officially opened last Friday.

"Our biggest concern is that we have many, many acres of Bartlett pears which CanGro Foods wanted a few years back," says Mr. Fletcher, 74, who remembers the days when there were more than 50 canners in the Niagara Peninsula.

"Now we have probably as many as 25 acres, which is probably going to go to waste," he says. "While we'll be able to sell a lot of Bartlett

pears here, it's practically nothing in comparison to what we really grow."

Mr. Fletcher says other pear varieties sell well, but farmers can't compete with CanGro's new supplier of Bartletts — China.

He says the Chinese pears can be packaged as a product of Ontario even though they're not grown here and questions why Premier Dalton McGuinty's government can find money to subsidize tobacco farmers and car plants, but for a canning plant "he's got nothin'."

"They can buy them (the pears) cheaper there. Well, good. My understanding is the Chinese get a dollar a day."

Sarah Megens, project manager for Hamilton Eat Local, says the food map gives people the opportunity to help farmers like Mr. Fletcher while enjoying fresher, tastier food that is often healthier.

Buying locally grown food also avoids the environmental cost of shipping food over long distances and boosts the local economy, she says.

"Farmers grow different foods that you just can't buy in a mass-market retail (outlet). They're often better-

quality foods and they're varieties that don't withstand long-haul transportation or have peculiarities about them," she says.

"One of my favourite statistics is that there's about 6,000 varieties of tomatoes on this planet, but there's only 15 that are available through mass-market retail."

A project of citizens group Environment Hamilton, the

free food map offers directions to 65 area farms.

The cost of the 40,000 copies is supported through contributions from farmers, the city, the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, Hamilton Community Foundation, advertising and fund-raising.

"This is a starting point, as I see it. We still have to demand that local food be made available through restaurants, through major retailers, through Fortinos," Ms. Megens says.

"They used to do it; they can do it again. But they're not going to do it unless we demand it, so if people want to buy Fletcher's apples at the Fortinos in Glanbrook, they have to ask for it and continue to ask for it."

John Robinson, whose 170-acre family farm on Eighth Concession in Flamborough was also forced to relocate its market stall from Centre Mall, calls the food map "a good idea."

He welcomes all the help he can get and says there are good reasons to support local farmers.

"I think there's going to be a food shortage coming soon because on my road alone — this is for example — there used to be 12 farmers that used to make a living," Mr. Robinson says.

"And right now, there's two: myself and my neighbour," he says. "The farmers have faded out. The new generation is not there."

A fourth-generation farmer, Mr.



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Robinson, 42, says he's diversified into growing flowers to supplement his mainstay of vegetables like potatoes, peas, beans, cucumbers, carrots, beets, peppers and tomatoes.

He also grows commercial corn on land he rents, boosting his overall acreage to 550.

Even so, Mr. Robinson says farming remains tough slogging, requiring 80-hour work weeks, which is a commitment fewer and fewer people are willing to take on these days.

There are also the uncertainties of weather — last year's drought cost him \$124,000 in reduced yields.

"It's hard work," he says. "Everybody wants easy work and top dollar. We all want that. But to be honest, it's got to be in you."

The food map is now available at public libraries, the downtown and Ottawa Street farmers markets, area farms, community events, Tourism Hamilton kiosks and at the Kiwanis Boys' and Girls' Club of Hamilton, 45 Ellis Ave.



PHOTO BY RICHARD LEITNER

**Doug Fletcher's stall enjoys some brisk business at the official opening of the Ottawa Street Farmers' Market last Friday. The occasion also launched the second-annual Hamilton Eat Local food map.**