

HIDDEN CULINARY

gems



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A collection of local culinary stops that don't always get the attention they deserve

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALEX BIELAK

Our region's bounty is truly astonishing. Just minutes from the heart of Waterloo, apples, maple syrup, summer sausage, free-range duck eggs, raw honey, quilts, flowers, plants, produce and firewood are on offer. We're known far and wide for Oktoberfest, the Elmira Maple Syrup Festival and the St. Jacobs Farmers' Market. Residents gravitate to noted purveyors like Vincenzo's, Central Fresh Market, Herrle's Country Farm Market and Caudle's Catch Seafood, not to mention a growing array of good restaurants and craft brewers.

Often, though, it's stumbling upon a hidden epicurean gem that brings the most satisfaction. Here is a small selection of food purveyors that are perhaps not quite as widely known as they deserve to be.



AMBROSIA PASTRY COMPANY Waterloo ambrosiapastry.com

Ambrosia Pastry is the epitome of a hidden gem, says local writer and foodie Luisa D'Amato. Located by the rail track — in a semi-industrial area on Roger Street — the compact building's blue awning is the only indication something special lies within. There, Aura Hertzog and Tim Simpson handcraft splendid single-origin chocolate from the bean, or, on Saturdays, sell traditional pastries including canelés, éclairs and Liège waffles. In the summer, Hertzog says, "we're all about ice cream sandwiches — making all the components." The new spur trail out of uptown means such delights are but a bike ride away.

THE CULINARY STUDIO'S FARMERS' DINNERS Kitchener theculinarystudio.ca

Celebrating five years as business partners, Red Seal-trained chefs Jody O'Malley and Kirstie Herbstreit run a multitude of cooking courses in their gleaming studio at the entrance to Belmont Village. They've also built a loyal following for their lunch offerings and takeout, but the real treat is their twice-monthly farm dinner series, each featuring the best from a specific local farm or supplier. "These events allow us to showcase our skills as chefs and develop creative menus," said O'Malley. Since they have so many regular customers, it forces them to come up with something new every time, added Herbstreit.



The Culinary Studio's Red Seal-trained chefs Jody O'Malley and Kirstie Herbstreit.

ELMIRA'S OWN AND FLORALANE FARM MARKET Elmira

Stuart Horst makes sure I'm clear there are two separate businesses operated by his family at the farm just north of Elmira. The farm market sells all manner of produce as well as delicious-smelling baked goods, while the soon-to-be-expanded half-hectare greenhouse produces wonderful, sweet, pesticide-free cherry, grape and beefsteak tomatoes. These are picked off the floor-to-ceiling vines as soon as the sun ripens them to perfection. About to be available year-round, they're sold at the farm market, of course, but can also be found at various Sobey's and other locations, including several mentioned in this article.



LEFT: Stuart Horst checks his produce at Elmira's Own.

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T & J SEAFOODS

Kitchener
tjseafoods.ca

"It's a nightmare to find Elm Street," quips Brendan Jardine. He's the son of one of the founders of this venerable seafood retailer housed in a squat red-brick building just off Strange Street. Sustained by a loyal clientele, they'll celebrate their 50th anniversary in 2017. Of course, there are all sorts of fresh and frozen fish for sale, but the crown jewel is their smoked salmon. Cured according to a secret recipe, it's cold-smoked in the back of the store "almost daily" in small batches using hardwood sawdust. It ranks among the very best I've ever had.

RIGHT: Brendan and Goldie Jardine of T & J Seafoods.



OAKRIDGE ACRES COUNTRY MEAT STORE

Ayr
oakridgeacres.ca

Mark and Cindy Gerber raise bison and Black Angus cattle and also run a busy farm shop at the southern tip of Waterloo Region. Their daughter, Jessica, showed me around the immaculate store with ranks of clearly labelled freezers and shelves stocked with antibiotic-free, ethically raised meats and other products from Oakridge and 40 other local farmers and suppliers. Visitors from Toronto and London make up an increasing part of the clientele. Visitors can also pick up heat-and-serve meals prepared by the in-house chef, take cooking classes and observe the bison in the field as they drive up the long laneway.

RIGHT: Jessica Gerber is the daughter of Mark and Cindy Gerber, owners of Oakridge Acres Country Meat Store.



SILVA'S PORTUGUESE BAKERY

Cambridge
silvasportuguesebakery.com

Waterloo Region is home to many people of Portuguese descent, including local writer and foodie Liz Monteiro. She recommended Cambridge's Portuguese groceries and bakeries, and the welcome at Silva's was genuine and warm. Naturally, bread and rolls of all kinds are for sale, including homestyle potato bread made three days a week. But I loved the chicken, charbroiled right behind the pastry counter. Brushed with co-owner Nelia da Silva's piri piri sauce, the skin was deeply crispy and the meat succulent. There are also grilled sardines and other specialty foods, not to mention Portugal's national soccer team memorabilia.

LEFT: Silva's Portuguese Bakery employee Neusa Fernandes and co-owner Nelia da Silva.



STEMMLER'S MEAT AND CHEESE

Heidelberg
stemmlermeats.ca

This family-owned and run store manufactures a lot of their own product, including smoked and deli meats, unique sausages, heat-and-serve dishes and fresh local produce. With strong links to local farmers, they know where their meat comes from and what it's been fed. The pork belly is peerless and sought out by top chefs in the region, while the smoked pork jowl has tremendous flavour. A keen cook himself, co-owner Kevin Stemmler says he's proud of the many awards they've won over their 30 years in business, including provincial gold in 2015 for their double-smoked bacon.

LEFT: From left, Kevin, Terry and Shawn Stemmler of Stemmler's Meat and Cheese.



SWEET AND SAVOURY PIE COMPANY

Waterloo
justlovepie.com

A disenchanted financial planner, Henry deJong founded the enterprise in 2014. "Baking is in my blood," he says. "My father emigrated from Holland and the bakery he founded in Port Perry in the '60s is now run by one of my brothers." Offering about 40 different kinds of pies and tarts at his small store on Bridge Street, and with a stall at the St. Jacobs Market, he loves to incorporate his own homemade beer in a wonderfully flaky Steak & Stout pie.

Special order "Cutie Pies," which look like Cake Pops, are a big hit with customers, too.



LEFT: Henry deJong, owner of Sweet and Savoury Pie Company.

LEGACY GREENS

Kitchener
legacygreens.com

An unanticipated jewel in the streetscape of downtown Kitchener, this chic green grocer began as a pop-up. Based on that experience, owner Jordan Dolson extended the lease and sells an eclectic range of food-stuffs, including veggies grown on her small holding and by local farmers and value-added products prepared by an in-house chef. She's also begun a popular weekly produce-box subscription program. A dairy farmer's daughter and escapee from government service, she loves farming, as well as the urban core and its people. "I want to be accessible to the whole community, selling in small quantities with reasonable margins," she says.

RIGHT: Jordan Dolson, owner of Legacy Greens.



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FOOD IN THE WATERLOO REGION FACEBOOK GROUP

facebook.com/groups/FoodInTheWaterlooRegion

At 4,800-plus members, this regional foodie forum is a virtual gem of a destination. Group co-moderator Aura Hertzog notes “an emphasis on supporting small local businesses and farmers.” You’ll find compendia of breakfast and brunch spots in Kitchener and Waterloo, caterers, local food blogs and independent food stores. Search the site or seek recommendations on specific cuisines, lunch spots in a neighbourhood, which grocers are open on a holiday or where to source a specific brand of cola, Israeli bamba or organic coconut oil. Replies usually roll in fast and are overwhelmingly helpful but can sometimes veer off topic.

MARTIN'S FAMILY FRUIT FARM

Waterloo
martinsapples.com

One of three brothers who manage one of Canada’s largest apple enterprises, Steve Martin lives within sight of the original farm store. He says visitors to the farm, which has been in the family since 1820, range from seniors who find the farmers’ market too busy to millennials who want to connect with the producers of food they buy. In addition to selling apple crisps as far afield as Israel and Thailand, Martin’s grows 26 varieties of apples. Some heirloom varieties, like Russets, Snows and Tolman Sweets, are only available at the store a couple of weeks in the year.



Rob Brady, owner of Brady's Meat and Deli in Waterloo.

BRADY'S MEAT AND DELI

Waterloo
bradysmeats.com

U.K.-born, I still yearn for traditional British butchers. Genial Manchester United fan Rob Brady fits the bill perfectly. His thriving little shop, tucked behind the wall of an adjacent strip mall restaurant, is near-invisible from the corner of Phillip and Albert streets. It’s packed with great cuts of meat, from local to international,

various foodstuffs, including his own steak rubs and hard-to-find products like Provimi Glace de Veau. The beef and lamb are standouts, and Australian Wagyu beef sirloin might just be the greatest steak you’ve ever tasted. You can also stop by for a tasty lunch sandwich.



Steve Martin, one of the three brothers who manage Martin's Family Fruit Farm in Waterloo.

THE EVENT FIRM'S POP UP RESTAURANT

Waterloo Region
theeventfirm.ca

The night before the event, the location for the monthly BYOB pop-up dinner is announced to registered participants. Neither the chef’s identity nor the menu are revealed until diners arrive at the venue. According to The Event Firm’s owner, Carolina Soares, she organizes the events mainly to promote local chefs and businesses and to support local food. “We want it to help everyone grow their businesses and create a great night of networking with amazing food and atmosphere.” Venues to date have included a beautifully adorned warehouse and a verdant greenhouse, with between 30 and 92 people attending.



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Ben Murphy, owner of Murphy's Law Distillery.

HILLCREST HOME BAKING Floradale

A contact in Floradale alleged Hillcrest makes the best doughnuts and dinner rolls ever. The traditional Mennonite country store, in the northernmost part of Waterloo Region, sells all manner of goods mainly to locals. The real treasure, the bakery, is in the back, where an array of fresh-baked goods cram the compact space. By the time my wife and I returned to the car, our six-pack of freshly glazed "Crestbits" was unaccountably down by five. Enos Eby, co-owner of Hillcrest with wife Erla, chuckled self-effacingly when I suggested their doughnuts could put Tim Hortons out of business. Fact is, they could ...



WOODFIRE BAGELS Kitchener

Crusty, chewy, traditional Montreal-style bagels are first boiled and then baked in a wood-burning oven to develop distinctive flavour. Baker-in-chief Jennie Cober cooked on wood fires as a child in India. She's up at 3:30 a.m. Monday to Saturday producing several varieties of bagels. Made with unbleached flour, water, yeast, salt and some sugar, they measure up to Montreal's St-Viateur or Fairmount's products and are cheap to boot. Woodfire regularly sells out, so it's best to order ahead. Vincenzo's, the Victoria Street Market and others also carry their bagels for those who don't have time to find the hard-to-get-to Kingsway Drive store.



BLOOM RESTAURANT AT CONESTOGA COLLEGE

Kitchener
bloomatconestoga.ca

Undeservedly under the radar, Bloom is a living lab for students in the college's culinary and hotel and restaurant management programs. Under their instructors' watchful eyes, they participate in both cooking and serving. "The food is very good," D'Amato notes. "Imaginative, and it's an adventure." Check the website for lunch and dinner seating. Menu themes change weekly, and the three- or four-course meals, based on local seasonal products where possible, are a tremendous bargain, and even more so for seniors. Bloom also boasts a surprisingly good wine list. 🍷



From left, Conestoga College culinary arts instructor and chef Gini Bechtel with Jacob Grammer and Ibolya Toth.

MURPHY'S LAW DISTILLERY Elmira murphyslawmoonshine.com

Ben Murphy looks barely old enough to drink legally, let alone be proprietor of the only distillery in Waterloo Region. It's based in a light-industrial strip mall on Elmira's outskirts. There Murphy, making the most of extracurricular pursuits undertaken while on an athletic scholarship in the southeastern U.S., produces several grain-to-glass "shines." He sources grain for the mash for his delicious "Apple Pie Shine" from Floradale, maple syrup from local Mennonites and apple cider from Martin's, just down the road. Totally legal, you can grab a Mason jar from the LCBO or drop by the distillery storefront for a tasting.

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