

## From Producer to Plate

# Dishing out good food and great food practices

From the field to the table, a B.C. food collective, is re-creating connections between people and the food they eat.

Heartland Quality Foods and Farm Tours Co-operative, located in Kamloops, B.C., champions the rewards of eating fresh, local foods. But more than a supplier, HQF and the ranchers and farmers who are part of it—all of them located with a 100-mile radius of the central B.C. city—are driven by a desire to create sustainable agro-food systems for this and the next generation of eaters and farmers through partnerships and education.

“We have de-structured the infrastructure we’ve had over the last 40 years with the change in food policies and we’re seeing the effects of that on our health and our health-care system,” said Andrea Gunner, Heartland Foods CEO.

“If we can rebuild the infrastructure of our food system, it’s going to be better for our economy, it’s going to be better for our society and it’s going to be better for our communities.”

Ranching and farming are deep-rooted in the Kamloops area, and those interested in learning about local operations can arrange for tours of member farms.

Right now, the tours are done on a part-time, no-cost basis, but Gunner said the plan is to generate additional income for member farms through agri-tourism and direct farm marketing.

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~Andrea Gunner, Heartland Foods CEO

Also onboard with HQF is the local school district. Together, they have developed the Farm-to-School program, which will include school farm tours and already boasts a salad bar at the district’s largest high school.

Funded by the Public Health Council BC, the program began as just a salad bar, offering students fresh greens and vegetables but in September it expanded to include chili, soup and stew as well as food themes, such as Greek Week.

With monetary donations from a local business



Food security, from producer through co-op and, finally, to consumer, embodied: Betty Peters, of Dominion Creek Ranch, a beef, lamb and pork producer; Andrea Gunner, Heartland Foods and Farm Tours Co-operative general manager; Marla Ronnquist, Heartland Quality Foods retail store manager and Suzen Allen, happy HQF customer.

association, HQF also gives back to the community, purchasing needed foods for city food-share programs such as the Kamloops Food Bank from local growers and ranchers.

“Heartland does supply that food and our growers get the benefit of that as well . . . rather than going to a food distributor and not having any connection to the community,” Gunner said.

“It’s just trying to close that circle.”

The Heartland model is being looked at as a template for other co-operatives in the province—and even further east.

Although nothing has been formalized, Gunner said she has been talking with a farmer’s co-op in Manitoba. She’s also in discussion with others in Williams Lake and in the Kootenay area.

“We’re working at recording how Heartland came into being, its successes and failures, so that other communities can follow our lead,” she said.

“It’s not just helping co-operatives—our baseline mandate is for food security in this community.

“That, combined with helping other co-ops, means we’re helping other groups and other communities figure out how to do this and be economically viable with good-quality, local, safe food for their community.”

For more information, call 250-374-6693, e-mail [heartlandfoods@telus.net](mailto:heartlandfoods@telus.net) or visit [heartlandfoods.ca](http://heartlandfoods.ca).

~Melissa Lampman