

Good Eats, Local Meats

Eat local, people keep saying. Writer Barbara Kingsolver went so far as to keep a journal of her quest to eat food from within 100 miles of her home for a year. Sounds interesting, but I really don't have it in me to commit that amount of time to canning and dehydrating. Yet there must be a reason why the corn I buy at the cottage tastes so much better than the corn in the city. And I'm sure there's a difference in the flavour of beef and chicken I've bought that's supposedly "local."

No question, consumers' interest in purchasing local products has changed over the past 10 years. We know supporting local farmers is good for the economy and the environment too, because fewer fossil fuels are burned to transport food to us.

But how do you learn more about food and where it comes from? I searched "farms" on the internet and found Muskoka has farms selling everything from eggs to strawberries. On the meat front, you can buy chicken, turkey, beef and bison directly from source. Good to know — except I don't want to spend one of my precious Saturdays at the cottage driving all over for local cuts of meat. Could it be easier than that?

I decided to check with Keely Schierl at the Dwight Market. Since Keely took over the store in 2006 she's been selling excellent meat and poultry, but I'd never asked her where it came from. I walked into the store and felt warmed by the familiar jingle of the door chime. Keely was flipping through the *Joy of Cooking*, talking to another customer about options for cooking a very large roast. Lucky customer: it was Keely who, after I'd

spent years alternately over- and under-cooking steak, finally set me straight on how to master beef on the barbecue.

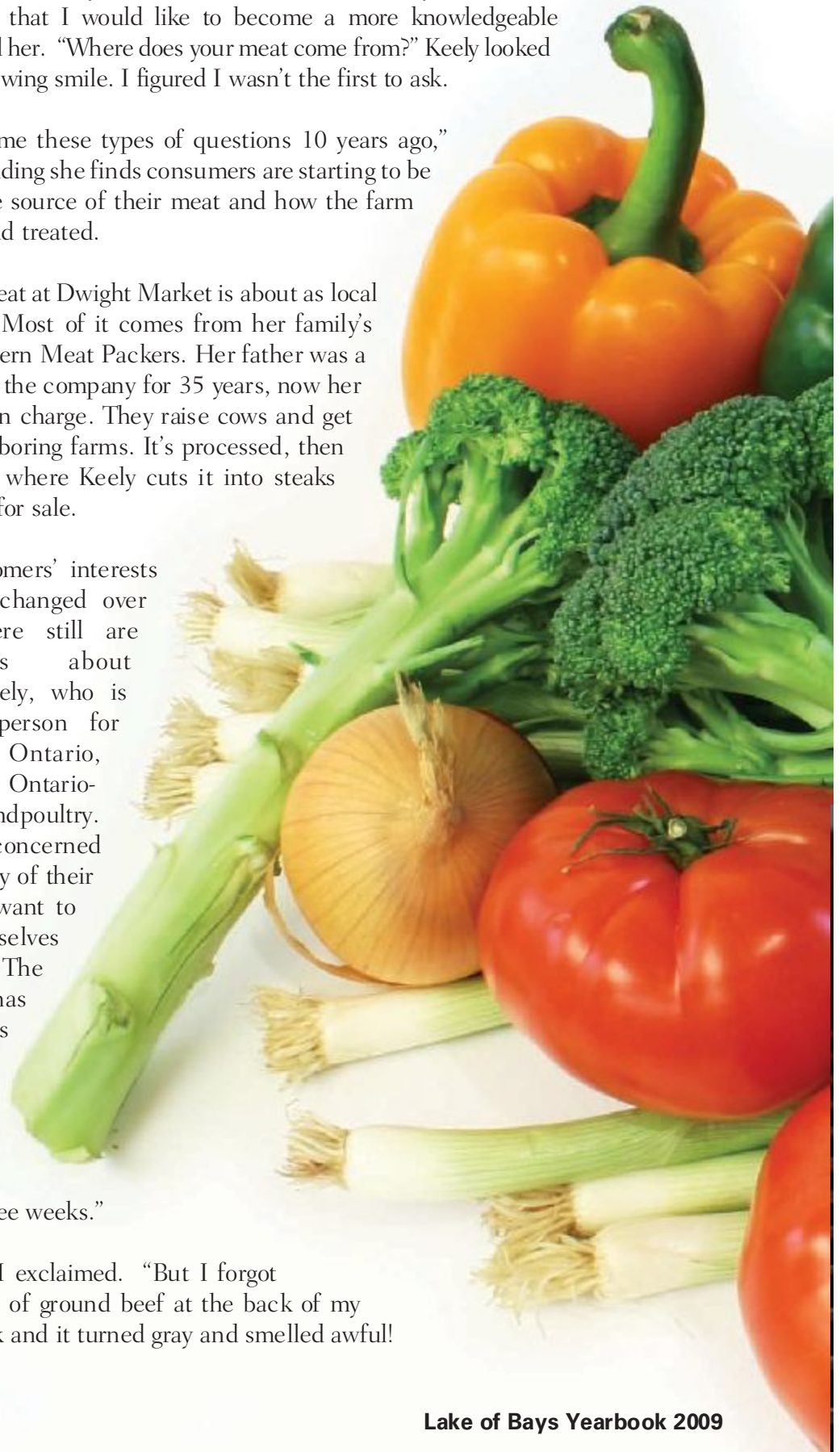
Keely greeted me warmly (she seems to remember everyone's name). "I have decided that I would like to become a more knowledgeable consumer," I told her. "Where does your meat come from?" Keely looked at me with a knowing smile. I figured I wasn't the first to ask.

"No one asked me these types of questions 10 years ago," Keely replied, adding she finds consumers are starting to be interested in the source of their meat and how the farm stock was fed and treated.

Turns out the meat at Dwight Market is about as local as you can get. Most of it comes from her family's company, Northern Meat Packers. Her father was a butcher and ran the company for 35 years, now her brother Mark's in charge. They raise cows and get pork from neighboring farms. It's processed, then sent to Dwight, where Keely cuts it into steaks and pork chops for sale.

"Although customers' interests in meat have changed over the years, there still are misconceptions about meat," said Keely, who is also a spokesperson for Homegrown Ontario, which promotes Ontario-produced meat and poultry. "People are concerned with the integrity of their meat, but still want to distance themselves from the kill. The public also has misconceptions about aged meat. Beef is a better product as it ages and should be aged at least three weeks."

"Three weeks!" I exclaimed. "But I forgot about a package of ground beef at the back of my fridge for a week and it turned gray and smelled awful!"



It was incredible!” Turns out beef should be aged in whole pieces. Once it’s ground, bacteria can get mixed into it so it needs to be eaten soon.

Then Keely filled me in on chicken, which should be air chilled. Cheaper and poorer cuts of chicken go through a process called “pumping”, where a machine injects water and salt into the chicken to make it juicier. Apparently I really am tasting a difference.

While we were talking, Keely had wrapped four two-inch rib eye steaks for me. She didn’t even need to ask what I was looking for. “Interests have changed, but I find that people still like their set meals and rituals,” she said. She ought to know — despite her efforts to interest me and my family in other meats, we always go with rib eye for Saturday nights. Why change what’s perfect?

Recipe for Perfection: Keely’s Barbecued Steak

1. Take the steak out of the fridge at least one hour ahead of time. This allows the meat to warm to room temperature so the centre’s not cold while it’s cooking.
2. Preheat your grill. It should be hot when the steak goes on.
3. Season the steak with oil and salt and pepper or steak rub.
4. Place the steak on the hot grill. When you can lift the meat without tearing, rotate to get grill marks.
5. Once blood bubbles up, it’s time to flip the steak and repeat step 4.
6. When blood bubbles up again, it is time to take it off the grill. If you leave it until the steak feels firm, you’ve overcooked it.
7. Take the steak off the BBQ and let it stand for a few minutes so the juices can set into the meat.
8. Eat and enjoy!

