



# THE MARKETING TRANSFORMATION BEHIND THE EAT LOCAL REVOLUTION



What can we learn from the Forest City Cookbook whose collaboration united 60 local chefs, craft brewers, bakers and farmers to celebrate the culinary marvels of London and region?

BY PATRICK MORLEY

EVERY PASSION PROJECT has its turning point, says the Forest City Cookbook's (FCCB) marketing and communications guru, Brian Blatnicki – the point where projects either lose momentum and die on the vine or ripen into something wonderful and delicious.

For Blatnicki, along with his colleague and FCCB creator Aleska Robles, the turning point came at a critical time in the development of the cookbook. It was late summer 2017 and the project needed a boost. The idea was simple, yet powerful: deliver to 10 prominent local businesses a cardboard box filled with pure, local South Western Ontario soil, some fresh local produce and a written request to join the FCCB crowdfunding campaign.

The boxes, says Blatnicki, garnered \$15,000 in pre-ordered book sales along with valuable corporate support. They also became a poignant symbol of the marketing power embedded deep in the local soil and produce – a power that Blatnicki and Venezuelan-born Robles have

harnessed with their locally-focused cookbook, with hopes of uniting and celebrating London's culinary scene.

"This project is about building the local food community," says Robles. "It's about connecting with and showing Londoners the amazing food that is grown and prepared in their own communities by local farmers and chefs."

The connection that Robles hopes to make is rooted in the idea that farmers, chefs and consumers should participate in the same culinary narrative. For wine, beer and spirits, the regions where they are made and the story of how and why they are made are vital components of their marketing successes or failures – why not the same of produce and meat?

This is the key question that Blatnicki and Robles have grappled with as the project evolved. Blatnicki believes that successful modern marketing is about connecting directly with consumers' passions, politics and individual stories while showing why and how a product matters.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS



Modern consumers (mainly Millennials born between 1980 and 1995, who are now the largest generation in the Canadian workforce) make purchasing decisions based on where their money is going post-purchase and who the money is going to.

"Nowadays," says Blatnicki, "it's all about one-to-one marketing, not one-to-many like it used to be with ads. To be effective, you must let consumers know about the 'whys' of your product, as opposed to the 'whats.'"

The 'whys' are vital to the FCCB's narrative, says Blatnicki. He believes that consumers are now more interested in the stories behind the products and the entrepreneurs who create them, rather than the specs of the product or whether or not it's on sale.

With the FCCB, the farmers, chefs and food are protagonists in a culinary adventure that consumers are eager to join.

In a sense, one-to-one, narrative-based marketing strategies are meant to make products stand-out in a crowded marketplace by reaching deep into and connecting with the core philosophies and politics of consumers. "It mostly boils down to the story you can tell and how you document your products," says Blatnicki. "Like the story

of your local bakery, for example, how it came to be, who puts in the work, where do the ingredients come from? — this matters. As well, knowing their money is staying in the community is another important factor."

Located a few minutes south-west of London among a tree-lined field is the Sungold Organics farm — a FCCB partner specializing in local, fresh and organic produce. Sungold's Instagram

feed is beautifully curated, documenting the beauty of fresh produce and the building of the business from the soil up.

Sungold's founder, Andrew Meehan, believes the FCCB will be a vital tool in educating Londoners and local restaurateurs about the bounty of food grown in the region. It's also an opportunity to highlight the direct relationship between the farmer, chef, recipe and consumer.

Educating Londoners on the importance of these relationships is a key component to the FCCB's marketing and overall philosophy, says Meehan — showing readers that the farmer, chef and consumer are directly connected in the food industry cycle (something Millennials find very attractive).

Meehan believes that now, more than ever, the chef and farmer share the same marketing space.

Having chefs and farmers together in the same social media conversation, documenting their stories on Instagram and Facebook, seems like a no brainer. But in previous generations, they have existed in silos, hidden from one another, rarely sharing the same narrative or telling the same stories.

Meehan sees the FCCB as a representation of the connectivity the modern food industry is now embracing between farmer, chef and foodie. He also hopes that the cookbook will reach new audiences, inspiring them to participate in the local food revolution.

"It's at the point now where there is a lot of cross-marketing going on, especially through social media," says Meehan. "When I Instagram a photo to promote something I'm doing, I'm also sharing the restaurant where the food is going and vice versa. It's a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship that is natural."

Meehan says Millennials have ushered in a new approach to the food

they eat. Like Blatnicki and Robles, he believes they are more educated about where their food comes from and are more inclined to spend their money at farms and restaurants that reflect their individual food politics. As well, he says a new generation of young farmers and restaurateurs are reflecting and meeting the demands of the young consumer.

Here, a powerful economic relationship is formed that is based on loyalty, passion, and a desire to seek out food experiences that are authentic and ethical. When you have a trifecta of farmer, chef and consumer operating under a similar ethos the results become a tangible, populist movement — or, under the right conditions, a revolution.

The modern North American farm-to-table revolution has roots that date back to the early 1970s with a Berkeley California restaurant called Chez Panisse founded by Alice Waters. Waters, now with an estimated \$18 million CAD, began serving fresh, local, organic food in her restaurant and the idea took off. She is famous for inspiring Michelle Obama's organic garden at the White House and has written countless books and essays on the importance of farm-to-table.

Waters' work, says Meehan, introduced the farm-to-table idea into the consciousness of North Americans, but it has taken a while for it to catch on in London. Now that it has, he believes it's a perfect storm of viable local producers and chefs joining forces to meet the demands of a new generation of culinarians who are determined to eat local food.

"Industrial agriculture, and people moving to the city, created a disconnect between consumers and the food they eat and purchase," says Meehan. "Because of the industrial food model, it was difficult for niche producers to compete. But now that

consumers have come around to local food the response has been legit and sustainable."

When Ricardo Cavaco, founder of the Bifana Boys restaurant, catering business and food truck, was approached by Robles to participate in the FCCB, he said it was a no brainer. Like Meehan, Cavaco saw the cookbook as an opportunity to represent his culinary vision — a vision where the farmer, chef and consumer share the same food narrative.

"By buying local, we make connections with the chefs, farmers and customers," says Cavaco. "The customer begins to see the farmer and chef as artists. They see the vision and want to participate in the story. It's a powerful combination."

For Cavaco, local means keeping money in the community. It means inspiring your friends and neighbours to share their culinary stories.

"This is how people become active in their community," says Cavaco. "It's how we build strong local businesses."

Currently, almost 1,700 cookbooks have been preordered — almost double Blatnicki and Robles' original goal — and will be available sometime in late May or early June. The cookbook includes more than 60 local chefs, 40 local producers and 135 original recipes.

"It has gone way above and beyond our expectations," says Robles, "and that means we've captured something special in the community."

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