

Newcomer Kitchen unites community through food



By Brock Weir

Wherever we come from, we all know the taste of home.

We take it with us wherever we go and delight in finding the familiar. But we also delight in trying something new, experiencing new flavours, and seeing if we can replicate and reinterpret those new flavours in our own unique ways.

Chef Maxine Knight has seen this happen close to home at the York Region Food Network (YRFN) as instructor of the Newcomer Kitchen Program.

The Newcomer Kitchen Program is designed to help people making a new start and plant roots in a new community build bridges through the communal power of food.

“At York Region Food Network, we believe magic begins in the kitchen and around the dinner table,” says Ms. Knight. “Cooking classes provide wonderful opportunities to build community, create networks, practice English and build support systems. Through our cooking programs, we have seen strangers become friends, people share in each other's ups and downs, and participants become actively involved in their local community.”

This phenomenon is only set to grow. On Monday, following a cooking demonstration on savoury garlic scapes – in this case, garlic scape tempura – the Newcomer Kitchen Program received a welcome boost from the Province of Ontario, receiving a grant of \$320,000 over three years through the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF). The YRFN estimates that this grant will have a positive impact on the lives of more than 1,500 individuals across York Region.

Joining in the cooking demonstration to help celebrate

the grant was Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MPP Michael Parsa, who said the work of the YRFN was "truly amazing."

"Educational workshops such as this allows growth, partnership and community engagement within our Region," he said. "A Regional hub that supports healthy eating and access to healthy foods, the York Region Food Network has many wonderful programs available to our community members. A huge congratulations on receiving the Ontario Trillium Foundation grant for the Newcomer Kitchen Program and one that will allow seamless transition for newcomers in our community. Your endless support has helped many people within our Region, this initiative has helped many lives within our community."

Noting their mission of "Food for Health, Food for All", YRFN Executive Director Joan Stonehocker said the Newcomer Kitchen program is "designed to connect people together and connect people to the community" and this was a sentiment shared by Ms. Knight.

"It is amazing because everyone has to eat and when you're displaced and you don't have all the comforts of home, it's like your cuisine is the most familiar," said Ms. Knight on the power of food to bring people together. What we find is with our workshops, by sharing those foods and sharing how we cook together, amazing things start happening in our kitchens. We have people who started businesses together, we have people where barriers may have existed between different cultures, they don't exist anymore " at least while we're here. It is just an opportunity for people to connect and to talk. They often talk about what is happening in their Region or their local areas, they talk about the struggles of being a newcomer and having the opportunity for everyone to share those stories with each other gives an opportunity to uplift each other's experience.

"The other thing is just that power that food has in order to just connect with each other. Even if we look at our group here today, there are multiple ethnicities here, multiple age groups, and everyone is sitting down and enjoying and experiencing something new together. It shows food has the ability to do that, it breaks down barriers, walls and allows for a certain amount of inclusivity without any other things in the way.

"From my perspective, it is always amazing to see the different cultures. It is amazing to see the different ways people prepare things of the same ingredient and it is always fun to hear the debates. There are always debates. We see their confidence grow, even people who sometimes are emotionally going through rough times, they just start feeling more comfortable, confident and able to do these things."

For more information on the York Region Food Network and their programs, visit yrfn.ca or call 905-841-3101.