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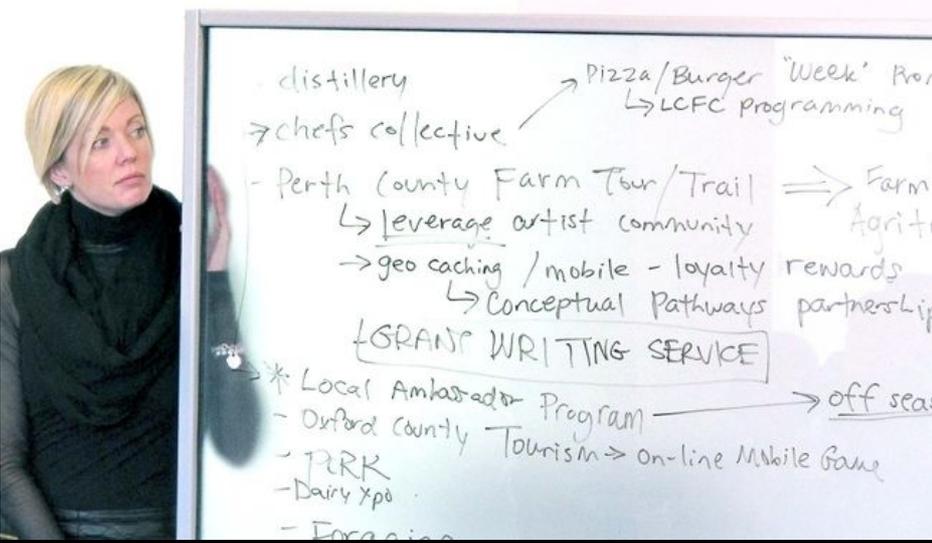
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NEWS LOCAL

# Culinary tourism workshop in Stratford focuses on new opportunities, initiatives

By **Mike Beitz**, The Beacon Herald  
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Danielle Brodhagen, director of product development at the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance, leads a brainstorming session on culinary tourism at the University of Waterloo Stratford campus on Monday. (MIKE BEITZ/The Beacon Herald)

With plans in the works for a new brewery, a new farm tour, a new chefs' collaborative and a new harvest festival, the back burners are filling up quickly in Stratford and across Perth County.

That was one of the key takeaways from an agri-culinary tourism workshop Monday at the University of Waterloo Stratford campus, where more than 50 chefs, farmers, restaurateurs and local tourism stakeholders gathered to discuss new opportunities in a growing sector.

Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance executive director Rebecca LeHeup told participants that this area is already one of the province's hotspots for food, thanks in part to the successful Savour Stratford Perth County culinary festival.

But it needs to keep things fresh.

"You can't become complacent in what you have," she said. "You need to be constantly innovative, and creating and leveraging the momentum that has been established within the last half a decade."

Partnerships are critical to that, noted LeHeup.

"Great partnerships help to increase awareness," she said, suggesting that even those businesses or producers offering similar products or services can work in "co-opetition" to promote the area to everyone's benefit.

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And co-opetition is already happening here.

Asked to name a few new culinary tourism-related initiatives in the area, several hands shot up Monday.

Pazzo Taverna chef Yva Santini briefly outlined plans for a "chefs collective," which would bring together Stratford chefs in a unique collaborative effort.

Billed as "a rallying cry," the collective is an opportunity for "a coming-together of all of the chefs of Stratford who are contributing to the evolution of Stratford cuisine," noted Santini.

"One of our main goals is to build a community of chefs," added fellow chef and Stratford Chefs School instructor Ryan O'Donnell.

Co-competition among members would be a key ingredient in the initiative, he said, "where before we were all in silos."

The group's first event, planned for May 4-5, would see participating chefs prepare a meal for 200 invited guests at an area farm, taking a pig "from slaughter to feast."

The chefs collective is one of several new and unique culinary projects simmering away in the area.

Perth County Visitors Association general manager Cathy Bieman spoke about a new agricultural tour being planned for this fall, highlighting not only local farms and the foods they produce, but also area artists, who would create sculptures out of hay and straw bales to be featured at each of the stops on the tour.

"It's exciting," said Bieman, noting that the hay and straw bale trail would be unique to the area. "I can see it being quite an event for Perth County."

A new brewery in downtown Stratford, a new meadery, the Flavours of Stratford walking tour, the Monkton Rhubarb Festival, an Ontario wines traceability app from Conceptual Pathways, and a fall harvest festival organized by The Local Community Food Centre were among the other initiatives discussed at the workshop, all of which reflect what LeHeup called the "taste of place" that more and more tourists are seeking out when they travel.

Monday's session was organized by the Regional Tourism Office for Huron, Perth, Waterloo and Wellington (RTO4), along with the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance.

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