

Invasion of the 'Foodies'

BY KAREN DALLIMORE

No, they aren't aliens – they're members of the urban media that descended into the chicken barns owned and operated by Murray Opsteen as part of a recent bus tour entitled *Safe Food Starts on the Farm*.

And the white suits aren't Halloween costumes – they're the full coveralls, boots and masks that must be worn by chicken barn visitors as part of intensive biosecurity measures used by livestock farmers to keep their animals safe from disease.

The bus tour brought 17 Toronto area food writers – recipe writers, chefs, and magazine editors, known to each other as "Foodies" – out to the country to see for themselves that livestock farmers were doing their part to provide safe food for the dinner plates of Ontario.

Ten agricultural groups, including the Ontario Farm Animal Council, AgCare, Ontario Veal, Ontario Chicken, Ontario Egg Producers, Ontario Institute of Agrologists, Ontario Pork, Ontario Cattlemen's Association, Dairy Farmers of Ontario and Ontario Turkey Producers, coordinated the event in partnership with the Agricultural Adaptation Council.

The first stop on the tour was Swiss Line Farm, a Holstein dairy operation tucked alongside the Niagara Escarpment near Milton, owned and operated by Roland Egger. "Every cow has a name," he told the tour as a huge cow wrapped its tongue around his arm. Along with Paul Norris, Field Service Representative with the Dairy

Farmers of Ontario, he answered a barrage of questions about animal husbandry, milk production and quality control procedures.

The next stop was at the Country Heritage Park in Milton, where Ontario Pork representative Bill Collier outlined recent changes to pork nomenclature that would affect food writers and recipe developers. The presentation was followed by a gourmet lunch of fresh Ontario foods, put together by Ontario Pork chef Bruce Thompson.

From there it was on to Opsteen's Chicken Farm near Hamilton.

"Ten years ago you wouldn't have put on masks and suits – things have changed," said Murray Opsteen. He explained the production cycle for meat birds, their diets, vaccinations, medications, and housing before asking the media, who had little exposure to farm life except for the occasional visit to the Riverdale Farm or the Royal Winter Fair in Toronto, to suit up and experience a visit with 45,000 three-week-old chicks.

John Neil, Farm Audit Supervisor for the On-Farm Food Safety Assurance Program (OFFSAP) for the Chicken Farmers of Ontario explained to the members of the urban media that there have not been a lot of changes to normal production practices over the years, but there has been a big change in the record keeping end of things: "We didn't need a food safety program to tell our farmers to raise a good product, it just helps to prove it."

Madeleine Greey writes a monthly column in *Today's Parent* as well as

providing recipe development and cooking classes for Loblaws and the LCBO. For her the tour was a unique opportunity to come into the farm environment and ask lots of questions. "If I had my way it would last a week," she said. "I've been on tours like this in France but this is the first in Ontario." As a

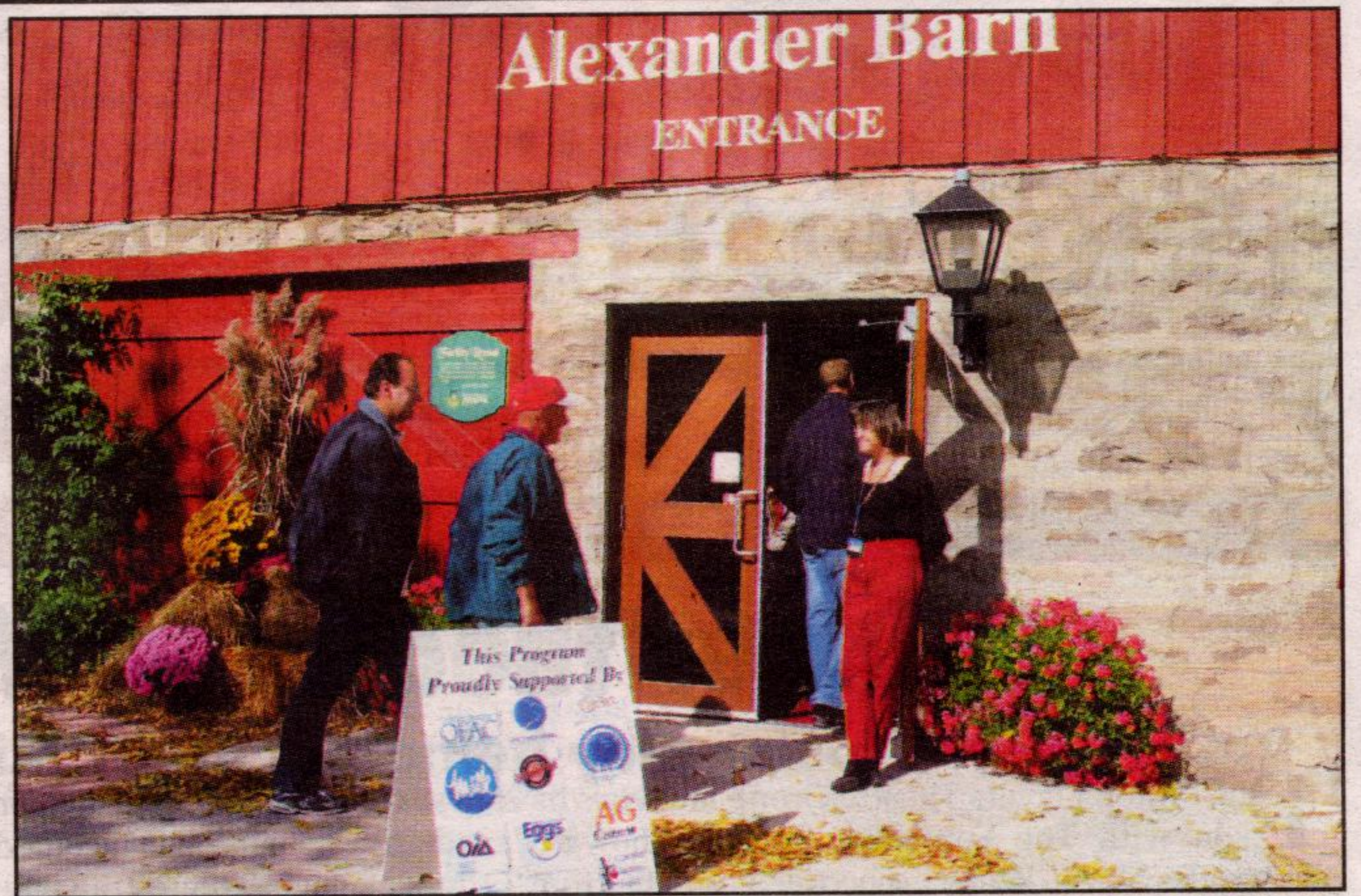


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Kelly Daynard, Communications Manager with the Ontario Cattlemen's Association, welcomes guests to a gourmet luncheon and information session at the Alexander Barn at the Country Heritage Park as part of the *Safe Food Starts on the Farm* Tour held recently.

writer she encourages people to buy locally produced food, but "to finally see what local means is great."

As an added bonus the food tour also provided a chance for representatives of several different agricultural groups to network. Wendi Hiebert, Food and Nutrition Specialist with Ontario Egg Producers, was struck by the similarity of the quality control programs that have been implemented by the different commodities. She explained that commodity group representatives are often at the same events such as the Royal Winter Fair or the Western Fair, but they don't often get the chance to compare notes. "Everybody is doing the same thing to make food safe," she said. "It's good to know everybody is moving in the same direction."

Organizers were encouraged by the positive feedback on the day and they hope to develop this type of initiative into future tours. "The best way to teach people about agriculture is to let them see it," said Crystal Mackay, Executive Director of the Ontario Farm Animal Council. "The tour was a great chance to connect the food writers to the farm and start building positive relationships."



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