



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Dave Passafiume of Organics Family Farm and Ontario Farm Fresh executive director Cathy Bartolic promote Organics baked goods at the Markham farm.

# Organization helps farmers sell to you

## Ontario Farm Fresh offers producers chance to share ideas

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Getting produce into any of the major Canadian supermarkets can be tough for an independent farmer.

As a result, many farmers turn directly to consumers to thrive in an often difficult industry.

However, farms selling directly to the public face the challenge of marketing: how do they get people who want their products through the doors?

Aurora-based Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association helps answer that question for more than 300 member farms.

"(Ontario) society is now three generations removed from having a connection to farms," Farm Fresh executive director Cathy Bartolic said. "Not so long ago, people had a grandparent or uncle who owned a farm that everyone could visit, but that's no longer the case."

Direct-to-market farms now serve as a connection to agriculture

for many people, she said.

"This is an increasing area of interest for farmers because instead of selling to wholesalers and losing touch with their goods, they are selling directly to people who can give them almost immediate feedback."

Farms that offer a tourism component are becoming increasingly popular, so people can see where their food is coming from and experience life on the farm first hand.

*'Not so long ago, people had a grandparent or uncle who owned a farm that everyone could visit, but that's no longer the case.'* -

Organics Family Farm in Markham, the only certified organic fruit-picking farm in the GTA, takes advantage of Farm Fresh's services.

The farm also offers baked goods made using a wood-burning stove.

"It definitely took a couple of years to catch on," owner Dave Passafiume, 42, said. "It was really

tough in the first few years because the people just weren't coming."

Now in its third year, word has spread and many customers come exclusively for the bread.

"I don't like to blow my own horn, but we have lots of older Europeans from the city coming up and saying they didn't even get this quality back in the old country," Mr. Passafiume said.

Although it's difficult to quantify how much help he gets from Farm Fresh, he said part of his success is due to the organization's ability to bring like-minded people together.

"We have traffic from their website and have attended their direct marketing seminars," he said. "At Farm Fresh, really good ideas often flow, and it's a great opportunity to get fresh ideas from others. Just talking to people, you can find out how they do things differently."

Members learn and grow through the experiences of others provincewide, Ms Bartolic said.

"Farmers are fairly isolated sometimes," she said. "We will be working away on something, not even realizing that others are doing the same thing somewhere else, but they are, so when we all meet up, it's useful to share ideas."

She cited Springridge Farm's Royal Wedding Marmalade as an example of a great idea that originated from a Farm Fresh meeting.

During one farm fresh bus tour, a member told the group how the lavender jelly he was making ended up in the hands of United States President Barack Obama.

That story gave Laura Hughes and the team at Milton's Springridge the idea to make marmalade with champagne.

After one bottle was sent over the Atlantic as a gift for the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's wedding, sales of Royal Wedding Marmalade beat expectations tenfold, reaching 5,000 units.

Another successful Farm Fresh member is Mr. Passafiume's brother, Matt, 40. His Stouffville farm and winery, Applewood, makes wine from unconventional fruits including strawberries, black currants and apples.

"I would say the biggest benefit is education of the public," Matt said of Farm Fresh.

"It's vital to let people know why we should be buying Ontario produce and Farm Fresh does that."

One reason his farm grows year-over-year is the organization's pro-

► For more information on Farm Fresh, visit [ontariofarmfresh.com](http://ontariofarmfresh.com)

► For more information on Organics, visit [organicsfarm.ca](http://organicsfarm.ca)

► For more information on Applewood, visit [applewoodfarmwinery.com](http://applewoodfarmwinery.com)

motional aid, he said.

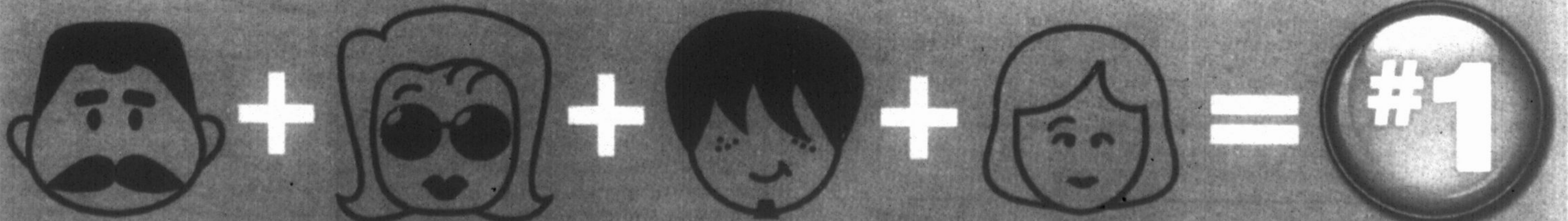
"Farm Fresh has been there for us to act as a mouthpiece. Whether that is with the media, getting other farmers online or creating promotional material, they're always there for us."

Farm Fresh allows independent farmers to work together as a group, he said. There are legitimate reasons why grocery store chains don't stock more local produce, he said.

"The big chains have their supply chain in place year-round. They can't just stop getting strawberries from California for the two weeks while Ontario strawberries are in season."

However, Ontario farmers can find other outlets, he said.

"We have the option of going directly to the customers to make that retail dollar. With the help of Farm Fresh, we are doing that more and more every year."



What does it mean? Find out on August 27