

Ontario local food champion

Spud 2.0

New food technology ups the environmental ante for Greenbelt packing plant

A cutting-edge industrial potato peeler that uses 80 per cent less water than standard equipment is the latest development at Cohn Farms, which processes, packs and delivers local crops to markets across Ontario.

To further decrease its carbon footprint, Cohn Farms—located near the town of Bradford, north-west of Toronto—acquired the “waterless” peeler, which washes and chops more than 20,000 lbs. of potatoes a day, thanks in part to a \$350,000 grant from the Greenbelt Fund.

Overall expansion is also planned for the plant. This would give as many as 30 local farmers access to the latest equipment

in food packing and processing, such as the German-developed peeler, which Larry Cohn believes is the first to be used in Canada. The farmers will also benefit from a bigger marketplace with a consolidated distribution network.

“One of [our] major goals is to help smaller farmers get their products to broader public-sector institutions,” explains Cohn, who operates the family farm and plant with his brother, Keith. “We’re [also] trying to raise the bar on food safety a couple of feet.”

Like Cohn Farms, many participating farmers have the “certified local sustainable” endorsement from Local Food Plus, a non-profit group promoting environmen-



THOMAS BOLLMANN

Larry Cohn in the processing plant of his family's third-generation farm.

tally and socially responsible food production. What this means too, explains Cohn, is that he will be able “to trace any produce back to the field it was grown in and who touched it.”

Expanding the packing plant will allow the Cohns to process other vegetables—broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, peppers, celery and beets—in addition to the potatoes, onions and carrots that they grow themselves.

Opening up larger markets to small farmers, many located in the Greenbelt, ensures that a wider assortment of fresh local produce gets to Ontario's daycares, schools, hospitals and long-term care facilities. “It's a win-win,” notes Cohn.

“If someone in Thunder Bay needs cauliflower, [with] our distribution network, they will get it,” he explains. And, he adds, with the consolidation of loads, there will be “less truck on the roads.”