



home stretch

DIFFERENT FACES. DIFFERENT VOICES.

EATING WELL



OVER THE LAST 40 YEARS, MARK HILLS (COOK TRAINING '72) HAS IMMERSSED HIMSELF IN THE FOOD BUSINESS.

He's been a cook, a seafood wholesaler, a manager of a rabbit processing plant and is a certified Chef de Cuisine. In 1992 he opened Hills Foods Ltd, and became the first meat supplier to introduce local and organic protein products, as well as exotic meats such as kangaroo, musk-ox, and rattlesnake, to B.C. In 2008 he was inducted into B.C.'s Restaurant Hall of Fame in recognition of his continuing effort to promote and provide sustainable, organic and alternative protein sources to both chefs and consumers.

One of the most enjoyable parts of my work entails travelling around the world in an ongoing quest for different flavours and new food trends. During a recent trip to

Europe to attend the world's largest meat expo in Frankfurt, I took a side trip with one of my childhood friends. He was on a journey to visit his mother's homeland, the tiny village of Rakiv Lis in the northern part of the Ukraine, and we stayed on the farm where his mother was raised.

It bore no relationship to a typical Canadian farm. A large open field was surrounded by a variety of farm houses each with its own barn, sheds, hutches, coops and livestock. On our first morning we were asked to oversee the daily chores. First we milked the cow, cooled the milk, separated the cream, made fresh cheese and churned butter. We then fed the pigs by getting last year's crop of root vegetables from the root cellar, shredding them, and mixing them with hot water and pulverized grain before pouring it all into the pig trough.

Corn and grains were tossed to the chickens, then we collected their eggs.

Finally, it was our turn to dine. Fresh cream, butter, cheese, sour cream, potato cakes, salo (salt cured white bacon, backfat of pork) a variety of homemade sausages, borscht, wild mushrooms. What was a regular breakfast for the family, was a heavenly experience for me. The variety of rich flavours in food that comes straight to the table from the farm outside your door is impossible to beat.

It gave me pause, once again, to consider how our food industry has evolved over the last few decades. I am often asked about the origins of different foods, particularly meats, and how they end up on our restaurant or dinner plate. But, when I start talking to people about what the industrialized meat industry involves – factory farms, growth hormones, antibiotics and genetically modified feed – many stop me mid-sentence to say, "Please don't tell me anymore. I'd like to enjoy my meat without feeling guilty."

But, we shouldn't feel guilty. Times have changed and it's no longer possible for the majority of us to raise and grow our own food. It's also easy to access meat that's grown in a way that is organic, sustainable and local. Certified organic meat, that's been fed organic grains and feed and never been treated with antibiotics or pesticides, is now widely available in grocery stores. It's also easy (and fun!) to visit a local farm or talk to a butcher about buying meat that's free run, un-medicated, and hormone-free. Or, explore wild sources of protein – guaranteed to be free of hormones and antibiotics. Few of us will ever get to experience food as directly as my friend's ancestors, but there are a couple of easy steps all of us can take towards ensuring our food reality is as close to theirs as possible. And remember, if none of these steps are available to you, eating should be about pleasure. The worst thing we can do is ruin a carefully prepared, delicious meal by serving it with a side of guilt. Bon appétit! ➤