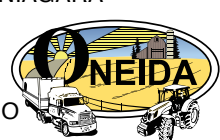


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Plenty of hardware handed out at Niagara 4-H awards ceremony

By Ann Marie Chechalk

The tables are adorned with green table cloths, the stage is lined with awards and trophies. The Community Hall of the West Niagara Agricultural Society is ready for the annual Niagara 4-H awards night. Members of the Lincoln Dairy Club are the hosts, while MCs Simon Heeringa and Janna Furry will welcome guests, sponsors and members to the podium.

A delicious pot luck dinner and amazing desserts start off the evening of Nov. 28. More than 80 members and their families came out for an evening of fellowship.

Greetings were brought from Niagara 4-H president Mike Chechalk. West Niagara Agricultural Society president Annette VanMarrum brought greetings from the fair.

"So thankful for all the volunteers that are part of 4-H and the fair. This year I was able to see my grandchildren as part of the 4-H program," she said.

Jessica Rooker, of the Wainfleet Fair, said: "We were able to welcome the goat club, dairy clubs and the poultry clubs to our fair

this year, we hope to keep growing with 4-H exhibitors."

The night offered a chance to honour the 2025 4-H leaders: Leading the Lincoln dairy club were Brad Eggink, Christine Linde, Amanda Comfort, Mark Heeringa and Matthew Pot. Lori Mann and Brenda Gilchrist led the rabbit club. Wainfleet dairy was led by Brenda Roszell, Amber Gilbert and Frank Stoop. Ann Marie Chechalk, Deanna Bartels, Andrew Chechalk, and Jonathan Dugdale led the goat club. The plowing club was turning the earth with Calvin Dunlop and Evan Scott and welcoming the poultry club members was Jessie Rooker and Kristen Leppert.

Life skill leaders Lynn Gibson and Deanna Bartels led the world of food and the best of the bakery club. Ann Marie Chechalk and Annette Noonan led the scrapbooking club over the year.

Thank you for volunteering and congratulations go out to Kristen Leppert and Matthew Pot for their first year of leading. Milestone anniversaries of volunteering included Christine Linde, 10 years, Brenda Roszell, 15 years, Niagara 4-H treasurer Vaughn Gibbons, 20 years. Special congratulations and much thanks to Frank Stoop for

35 years of dedication to the 4-H program.

Fifteen new members were welcomed to 4-H, all receiving a first-year seal and certificate: James Crompton, Ryeane DeBoer, Austin Ebeling, Mark Ebeling, Blake Jansema, Allison Kemper, Alice Klijn, Meira Marlatt, Bryson Moesker, Hailey Sikkens, Adrian Sicking, Carson VanMarrum, Harper VanMarrum, Reese VanMarrum and Anne Zawaly. Derek Van Wely and Evan Vanderzanden received one project provincial seals.

A 4-H Ontario pin was handed out to Benjamin Chechalk, Katie Gunn, Jack Kelly, Liam Kelly, Genesis Lopez, Lea Lopez, Haven Stec, Selena Van Wely, Juliet Van Wely, Alexis Vanderzanden and Tristan Wielink for completing six projects.

Zhianna Bacon, Brad Jansema, Emily Knutt, James Knutt and Chloe Mous-Hili received a 4-H coffee mug for completing 12 projects. Completing 30 was Emily McGee, while Morgan McGee completed 36 projects and Samantha Angle completed 48 projects.

Jim and Gay McIlwain sponsored the Tricia Vaughan Memorial Award, given to a member showing initiative, innovation and dedication to the 4-H program and mentorship and inspiration to others in the program and a giving spirit within the 4-H community and the community at large. Emily McGee represents those ideals, for volunteering within 4-H and at the West Niagara Fair.

Graduating member Brad Jansema was selected as the Kubota Longstanding Member along with the Ontario Plowman's Association



Gavin Vooy is awarded a blanket from the goat club for being champion novice showperson at the West Niagara Fair. ~ Ann Marie Chechalk photos

award as top agricultural member. Nominating him, leader Brad Eggink spoke of his many achievements.

"Brad is one of the most passionate, keen and hardworking youth we have had the pleasure to work with in the Lincoln Dairy Calf Club. Committed not only to himself, he has always shown exemplary leadership within the club, helping all members and educating all members on proper calf health, showmanship and clipping," Eggink said.

"He has excelled in both the show ring and in the judging competitions. Brad has landed a spot on the Niagara team for the Royal Winter Fair TD Class for the last eight consecutive years. When there are only eight spots available and nearly 20 youth competing for these spots, it illustrates his excel-

Continued to page A4 →



NIAGARA FARMS

Publisher

Stewart Grant • stew@granthaven.com

Editor

Luke Edwards • luke@granthaven.com

Business Development

Heather Dunbar • heather@granthaven.com

Graphic Design

Erin Parsons • niagarafarmsnewspaper@gmail.com

Billing Administrator

Jen Gaetan • jen@granthaven.com

Contributor

Ann Marie Chechalk

36 Water St. St. Marys, ON, PO Box 2310 N4X 1A2

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Frank Stoop was recognized by 4-H Ontario and Niagara 4-H for his 35 years of volunteering with Niagara youth.

FRONT PAGE PHOTO: The McGee sisters, Morgan and Emily, had a lot of awards to take home from awards night as they were congratulated for a very successful year in 4-H. ~ Ann Marie Chechalk photo

lence both in the ring and outside of the ring.”

Eggink said Jansema is always in the top spots for yearly judging competitions put on by Niagara 4-H.

“In 2023, Brad jumped in with both feet and purchased a dairy farm, which he farms with his dad and family under the Braejan Holsteins prefix. Running his own dairy farm, finding time to participate in 4-H and excelling while doing so all the while putting others before himself, we shall miss him as a 4-H member,” Eggink said.

Receiving the Spirit of 4-H Award sponsored by Ontario Holstein was Tyler Gilbert. This is presented to an outstanding 4-H dairy calf club member who exhibits strength of character and is making a positive difference within their community. The award is designed to recognize the contribution of a 4-H member, through their leadership, dedication and commitment to the 4-H program.

Benjamin Chechalk received a 4-H plate as the winner of the IPM beautification contest in the 4-H category.

District Six Grain Farmers sponsored the judging night awards: Top novice judge, Gavin Vooys; Top junior judge, Selena Van Wely; Top intermediate judge, Liam Kelly; Top senior judge, Brad Jansema; Top crop judge, Morgan McGee; and top overall judge, Brad Jansema.

Chris Mullet-Koop, president of the Niagara Federation of Agriculture, presented the Niagara Federation of Agriculture top member awards. He expressed hopes that as he looked around some of these members would go on to join the federation as directors in the future. Winners included: Brad Jansema, Lincoln dairy club; Emily McGee, Niagara goat club; Morrigan Mason,

rabbit club; Tyler Gilbert, Wainfleet dairy club; and Haven Stec, poultry club.

The top showmen competing in the grand champion showmanship competition at the West Niagara Fair was sponsored by the Ontario Institute of Agrologists. Agrologists study commercial and native plant communities and livestock production in order to improve yields, while at the same time advocating sustainable farming and ranching methods. Agrologists may also study farm, urban, and wilderness interfaces to find solutions to the challenge of competing demands on the land base, wildlife habitat, timber, recreation, urban expansion, and livestock. Most agrologists work as members of a team alongside other scientists and agriculture experts.

The Ontario Institute of Agrologists-Niagara Branch presented the awards to: Emily McGee, goat club; Brad Jansema, dairy club; and Haddessah Lodewyk, poultry club. All went home feeling warm and fuzzy in their new sweatshirts.

Emily McGee was to be congratulated as champion showperson at the fair and received the Frankie's Goats and Fine-Line Woodwork and Design Inc. trophy.

“We are very proud of Emily and all she has achieved with the goat club,” said Joanne Battersby.

Individual clubs presented many awards. The scrapbook club gave out bags containing calendars so members could remember when their meetings were scheduled. The cooking club passed out spatulas and the poultry club members received show preparation tool kits.

The Lincoln dairy club would like to thank all their sponsors and farms that supported them this year, financially and by lending their

Continued to page A5 →



Brad Jansema receives a sign for his farm as a prize for winning the Ontario plowman's award for top agricultural member in 2025. ~ Ann Marie Chechalk photos



Gay and Jim McIlwain present Emily McGee with the Tricia Vaughan memorial award for innovation and dedication to the 4-H program and mentorship and inspiration to others in the program and a giving spirit within the 4-H community and the community at large.



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calves to members. Awards were handed out to top novice member, Bryson Moesker; Top junior member, Janna Furry; Top intermediate member, Kate Kemper; Top senior member, Kevin Angle; and top overall member, Brad Jansema. The Lincoln club achievement day award went to Brad Jansema, while grand champion calf went to Brookelyn Eggink.

Jan Van Wely, of the Niagara Milk Producers, presented an award in memoriam of Maryanne McDougall. This award was presented to Rachelle Baarda.

The Niagara coat club recognized Gavin Vooys for champion novice showperson at the West Niagara Fair, Jack Kelly for champion junior showperson, Emily McGee for champion intermediate, and champion senior showperson, Morgan McGee.

The first year for the poultry club was quite exciting, with members competing at the West Niagara Fair, the Wainfleet Fair and the American Poultry Association-American Bantam Association national meet. The winner of the husbandry award was Haven Stec, the enthusiasm

award, James Crompton, the courage award, Anne Zawaly.

Rabbit club members were recognized for top enthusiastic member, Alexis Vanderzanden; Husbandry award, Haven Stec; Most dedicated member, Zhianna Bacon; Top member, Morrigan Mason; Top showperson cavy, Evelyn Green; and champion showperson, Lily Wiley.

Presenting the awards to the Wainfleet Dairy Club was Frank Stoop, a 35-year leader. Top spring heifer, Austin Ebeling; Top winter heifer, Abigail Knutt; Top fall heifer,

Tyler Gilbert; Top summer yearling, Emily Knutt; Grand champion calf, Austin Ebeling; Reserve grand champion calf, Emily Knutt; Champion novice showman, Blake Jansema; Champion junior showman, Abigail Knutt; Champion senior showman, Tyler Gilbert; and reserve champion showman, Abigail Knutt.

The club is looking forward to 2026 and another great 4-H year.

Thanks go out to the many sponsors, leaders and supportive families of the Niagara 4-H program. 🌱



Harper and Carson VanMarrum received tool boxes for preparation of their birds in the show ring as members of the poultry club.



Niagara Federation of Agriculture president Chris Mullet-Koop presents gift cards to the top members of the agricultural clubs: Tyler Gilbert, Emily McGee and Brad Jansema. Missing from the picture are Morrigan Mason and Haven Stec.

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Lessons on the farm: Enhanced classroom programming at Small Scale Farms

By Luke Edwards

The education system may do a lot for young people, teaching them important lessons in English, math and geography. But quite often there are important skills and knowledge that young people never learn.

With Red Maple Farm School, Renee Delaney and her team of supporters hope to fill that gap. This spring they'll be expanding a farm school program Delaney's run for a few years, offering new lessons in everything from financial literacy to basic carpentry.

"It's all the things where you say, 'I wish I learned this as a kid,'" Delaney explained.

The operator of Small Scale Farms in Thorold, Delaney has built the farm marketplace from the ground up. That experience has highlighted all those things she wished she'd learned growing up. She recalled trying to make a sandbox and struggling as a friend tried to explain the process to her over the phone.

"Everything was foreign to me," she said.

The farm school has been in operation for a few years, but up until now Delaney has focused on



Youth with Rose City Kids were out at Small Scale Farms last month to help renovate a room that will become the new Farm School classroom this spring, with expanded programming for teens and adults alike. ~ Luke Edwards photo

the one area where she does have some expertise: food. She teaches

students how to grow and harvest their own food, including how to preserve it and understanding the food system as a whole.

Ideas of growing the program came with the help of Rose City Kids, who connected her son with two mentors who were positive male role models for him.

"I watched my son transform under their mentorship," she said.

In this case, the transformation came with exercise, as they taught him how to get fitter, stronger and faster.

Delaney started thinking about all the other children who, for whatever reason, miss out on valuable life skills as they grow up.

And that's where the expanded Red Maple school started. With the help of Rose City Kids, Delaney started securing the support of people who had expertise in a wide range of skills. Classes will be held in an upstairs room at the marketplace that Delaney and volunteers have spent the winter renovating.

While a lot of the participants in the Rose City Kids program will benefit, Delaney said it's open to everyone, including teens and adults. The plan is to have beginner, intermediate and advanced levels, and Delaney said small class sizes and a relaxed setting will encourage students to try and not be afraid of making mistakes as they learn.

In the meantime, Small Scales Farm is looking for community

support to continue to develop and grow the program. Delaney plans to go to local churches and other social groups to invite children to participate and encourage adults who have expertise in some area to offer their time.

Financial and material donations are also being accepted. Delaney said there has already been a wonderful response, with people donating books and other materials.

They're also offering a special Rose City Kids produce bag, where money collected will help with the partnership.

Steve Nunes is a youth director with Rose City Kids. He was out with a handful of youth over the Christmas holidays helping renovate what will become the new classroom. It also offered a chance to teach the kids some basic woodworking skills.

"It's a breath of fresh air," he said of the opportunity to bring the kids to the farm. Previously they've come out to Small Scale Farms to learn about growing and harvesting food.

"They're learning how to use tools, and learning to do by doing, things they've never done before," Nunes said.

"The partnership is just awesome."

For more information visit smallscalefarms.ca and click on the Farm School link at the top of the page. 🌱



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Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Convention a 'don't-miss event' for horticultural growers

By Luke Edwards

The most important place for a horticultural farmer to spend their time is in the fields and orchards. But a close second might be the annual Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Convention.

Returning this February to the Niagara Falls Convention Centre, the OFVC offers a large trade show, dozens of expert presentations and networking opportunities throughout the two-day event.

"This is really a campus event. If you're a grower, this is a don't-miss event for sure because we have it all," said Glenna Cairnie, general manager of the OFVC.

There are more than 200 exhibitors signed up for the trade show, which will offer visitors a chance to learn about new technology, equipment, and services, speaking with reps from the various companies and organizations.

"The trade show is off the charts, it's very full," Cairnie said.

Attendees can also take in a wide variety of presentations on several themes, from tender fruit and oenology, to legume vegetables, agri-tourism and flower production.

"The program's powerful," Cairnie said.

"There's a big emphasis on technology...it's not just one tech session, it's embedded."

That means attendees can expect to learn about the latest technology throughout the trade show, and in many of the sessions.

Beyond that, the convention is hosting a variety of extra events. These include a farmers



The Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Convention returns to Niagara Falls next month, with a large trade show, dozens of presentations, and plenty of extras to do. ~ OFVC photo

and friends reception on Wednesday from 5 to 7 p.m. where visitors can enjoy some beverages and entertainment while meeting with other growers and experts.

There's also a rise-and-shine breakfast on Thursday from 7:45 to 9:15 a.m. and a kickoff party on Tuesday evening before the convention gets started in earnest.

In fact, it's some of those events that lead to Cairnie's favourite aspect of the annual convention. While there was a time when people questioned the value of in-person events, she

said that's no longer the case, as most seem to realize the importance of face-to-face conversations.

And the convention gives visitors, and Cairnie herself, a chance to do just that.

"My favourite part always is meeting the people I email throughout the year," she said.

The convention runs Wednesday, Feb. 18 and Thursday, Feb. 19 at the Niagara Falls Convention Centre. Tickets are on sale and early bird pricing is available until Feb. 11. For more information or to register, visit ofvc.ca.

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Tractor parade remains a holiday favourite

By Niagara Farms Staff

The Grinch wasn't the only green thing during this holiday parade. Nor was Santa's robe the only red eye-catcher. Instead, there were also plenty of John Deeres and Massey Fergusons to wow families at last month's tractor parade in Virgil. What

has quickly become a must-see holiday event in Niagara-on-the-Lake, December's parade welcomed dozens of farmers who decorated their tractors, trucks and sprayers in lights and holiday cheer. As they wound through Virgil, families were lined up to take in the parade. It also passed

Pleasant Manor to give some of the residents there a bit of Christmas cheer. Organized by Dorothy and Erwin Wiens, the event has grown significantly in the few short years since its inception. Last month's parade also supported the Terry Fox Foundation, Newark Neighbours and the Jamaica Relief Fund. 🌱



Last month's tractor parade that wound through Virgil saw a long line of local farmers showing off their farm equipment decorated for the holidays. Families lined the streets of Niagara-on-the-Lake to catch a glimpse of the spectacle. ~ Luke Edwards photo

Lincoln Museum exhibition pays homage to Niagara's winemakers

By Luke Edwards

Nowadays, wineries in Niagara regularly win prestigious awards and get recognized as global leaders in the industry. It's quite the improvement from the early 18th century, when a prominent woman of the day described Niagara wine as simply "tolerable."

A new exhibit at the Lincoln Museum and Cultural Centre covers it all, from early loyalists trying to figure out how to cultivate wine grapes in Upper Canada to the modern revolution that put Niagara wine on the international stage. The exhibit opened in the fall and will remain up until October 2026.

"The idea was to try to cover Niagara wine country in its entirety," said Adam Montgomery, curator of collections and exhibitions at the museum.

Though references to early winemaking are sparse, Montgomery said they did uncover the line from Lady Simcoe, wife of the first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada John Graves Simcoe, that suggested Niagara "produces tolerable wine."

"There are scattered references to people trying to make wine," Montgomery said.

The focus back in the early days was quantity over quality. That all changed in the latter half of the 20th century, as scientific research and entrepreneurship saw some of the pioneers of

the modern Niagara wine sector develop what would become iconic wineries.

But that's not to say nothing happened between the early days and the present. One especially interesting aspect of winemaking in Niagara, Montgomery said, came during the temperance movement where political leaders tried to restrict alcohol consumption.

"One of my favourites is prohibition," said Montgomery. During that time Ontario grown wine received exemptions from some of the temperance legislation.

"By and large if people wanted it, they could get it," he said.

The exhibition offers a prohibition corner that Montgomery said is meant to give off a speak-easy ambience. It includes a 1920s era tailcoat from Archie Haines, an MPP for Lincoln during the era.

Also featured in the exhibition are artifacts and information on old bottles, grape presses and other wine paraphernalia. The museum worked with local businesses like Malivoire and Kew, as well as educational institutions like Brock University's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute to develop the exhibition.

Interactive opportunities include 2D and 3D maps that teach visitors about Niagara's unique subappellations. The maps were created with the help of the Brock University Library's Sharon Janzen, maps, GIS, and geospatial data

specialist, and Derek Schneider, makerspace supervisor.

A scent station gives visitors an introduction into the various scents that make up the complexity of wine. It was developed once again with the help of Brock researchers, including Jennifer Kelly, senior scientist of oenology at CCOVI, and Hannah Charnock, wine chemist and sensory scientist.

It also covers important developments in Niagara's wine history like VQA and the growth of icewine from a niche offering to the globally recognized "capital I" brand it is today.

Montgomery said the goal was to offer something that would interest those in the industry and those from Niagara, but also visitors or those new to wine. And given the storied history of the nearby Jordan Wine Company, he said it was important for the Jordan museum to cover the history of Niagara wine.

Visitors can check out the exhibition while it's up. Admission is by donation. The museum is also hosting a few related events in the coming months, including a wine and movie night on Friday, March 6 where they'll be screening the documentary *Crush: Message in a Bottle*. They also have a broom making on old vines event with broom maker Amy Lou Taylor on Saturday, April 18.

Montgomery said they have a few other events in the planning stages. For more information, visit lincolnmuseum.ca.



The Lincoln Museum and Cultural Centre currently has an exhibit that covers the history of winemaking in Niagara. Visitors can learn about the early history, wine during the prohibition era, and take part in interactive displays such as one highlighting the complex scents of modern wine. ~ Lincoln Museum photos



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Moyer Apples poised to come back bigger, better, and tastier

By Luke Edwards

Deep roots can help you survive even the biggest catastrophes, and in Lincoln, few businesses have deeper roots than Moyer Apple Products.

Two and a half years after a fire destroyed their prominent facility along the QEW in Beamsville, the historic business broke ground on what they say will become a bigger and better facility to produce the famous Moyer candy apples sold throughout North America.

With a footprint of 70,000 square feet, the new facility will be significantly larger than the old building, which was around 46,000 square feet. Company president Mark Vanderveen said the added space will allow them to expand markets and look at new products, though they remain tight-lipped on exactly what those products may be.

"It opens up a lot of opportunities," he said.

The Moyer family arrived in Niagara at the end of the 18th century. Coming from Bucks County in Pennsylvania, they were one of the first families to settle in the area. Their apple farm dates back to 1799, and Tom Moyer still farms the orchard.

More recently they joined with Court Holdings, which marked a turning point of sorts as the caramel apple business took off.

"We were always trying to do something that was value-added," said Paul Moyer, founder of Moyer Apple Products.

They sell across Canada and the United States, and have even had some minor expansion into other markets. The 2023 fire wasn't their first brush with adversity - a 2015 outbreak of listeria among candy apples produced by other companies cast a shadow over the sector, even those like Moyer who weren't involved - so they had some experience quickly responding to hurdles. Even before the fire was out, Moyer was in talks with Mike Ecker at the Vineland Growers Co-operative, who had just moved out of their Jordan Road location and were able to offer up the space to Moyer.

The fact the company has continued to grow despite the speed bumps is a testament to their commitment and dedication. With the new building, Vanderveen said the company wants to show its local and national pride.



Dignitaries held a groundbreaking ceremony to celebrate the beginning of construction on a new Moyer Apple Products facility in Beamsville, which will see a significant expansion from its previous building that was destroyed by fire in 2023. ~ Town of Lincoln photo

"Not only the thermal event that we had...but all the pushback and the changing geopolitical forces. We want to make a very strong statement that we're here to support the Niagara region, Ontario and this great country," he said.

Once complete, Vanderveen said they could double their workforce from 60 to around 120. And they plan to have everything done locally.

The goal is to have the new facility up and running in late 2026.

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March Classic coming to Niagara Falls

By Luke Edwards

Ontario's grain farmers will be breaking new ground this spring as the organization that represents them moves their signature event to Niagara.

The Grain Farmers of Ontario's March Classic will come to the Niagara Falls Convention Centre this year. The move will allow event organizers to continue to grow and evolve the event, which features a trade show, a variety of guest speakers, and entertainment.

"Grain Farmers of Ontario is excited to bring the 2026 March Classic to Niagara Falls," said GFO CEO Crosby Devitt. "This new location will set the stage for important conversations and fresh opportunities for our industry. It's going to be an incredible event you won't want to miss

as we look ahead to new possibilities for Ontario grain farmers."

Organizers said the new location offers the space and infrastructure needed to present the classic, while also offering attendees the opportunity to take in one of Canada's premier tourist destinations.

With the move to the convention centre, organizers say parking and access will be improved and everything will take place in one venue. Attendees can also expect high-calibre speakers, business insights and a chance connect directly with industry partners.

"This year's lineup of speakers will offer exceptional insights into how embracing change leads to stronger leadership, innovation and new global opportunities," said Paul Hoekstra, vice president of strategic development for GFO. "The speakers' diverse experiences will

bring forward new ideas that are inspirational and timely in today's global climate."

Guest speakers include: Bestselling author and general partner for District Ventures Capital Arlene Dickinson, business analyst and former anchor of BNN Bloomberg's The Close Catherine Murray, co-founder of NoW of Work and author of Rethink Work Eric Termuende, and Canadian broadcaster, writer and filmmaker George Stroumboulopoulos.

Deb McGrath and Colin Mochrie will provide entertainment for the event.

The theme for the event is Breaking New Ground: Embracing Change.

Registration opened earlier this month. Those who register before Feb. 28 will also have a chance to win one of two early bird draws. For more information visit gfo.ca/march-classic.



The March Classic, an annual event put on by the Grain Farmers of Ontario, is moving to the Niagara Falls Convention Centre in 2026. Guest speakers will include, clockwise from top left: George Stroumboulopoulos, Eric Termuende, Catherine Murray, Deb McGrath and Colin Mochrie providing entertainment, and Arlene Dickinson. ~ Submitted photos



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Ag ambassador eager to highlight what makes Wainfleet wonderful

Jes Kumar will represent township at February conference, CNE

By Luke Edwards

Despite coming from one of the most populous countries on the planet, Jes Kumar's family knows what small town life is all about. And moving to Wainfleet a few years ago was a dream come true for the university student who has been named as the Wainfleet Agricultural Society's ambassador in 2026.

"In a small town everyone gets to know each other and everyone's there to support each other," she said.

Kumar was born in a hamlet in Uttar Pradesh, a state in northeastern India. The closest major city is Hardoi, but her hometown is essentially a village of her extended family.

"I tried to find us on Google Maps and we got really close but then the Google car didn't go any further," she said, a true sign of her small town bonafides.

When her family moved to Canada, however, they first settled in Ajax. As Kumar was nearing high school age, they bought the gas station by Ostryhon Corners. A few years later the family moved to Wainfleet, giving Kumar the small town, and big back yard, that she dreamed of.

"We had a large backyard, so our dog loved it, I loved it, and it was just really fun," she said.

"I wouldn't call it an adjustment because it was living the dream."

On regular trips back home, Kumar said she'd visit with the cows and buffalo her grandma keeps, and help out with chores on the farm.

"Every time we go back home I'm usually the one on the tractor. I'm usually the one helping out with the sugarcane," she said.

She has a sister with an adjacent interest in animals who is studying at university with the hope of becoming a veterinarian. So when local dairy farmer Brenda Roszell stopped in at the gas station, Kumar and her sister asked if they could visit the farm and see some of the Holsteins.

That eventually led to Kumar showing a heifer, a Jersey named Jolene, at a local show, and then to her being named ag society ambassador.

"It all started at Brenda's farm," she said.

Her role as ambassador is to promote the township, promote local agriculture, and promote the fair. To do so, Kumar plans to dive headfirst into the local farming community. To date, her interest in local agriculture has been from an outsider's perspective, driving and walking past farms and taking in what she can.

But with the new role, she hopes to learn what makes farmers in Wainfleet tick. A gifted public speaker - she's had to hone her presentation skills as an architectural engineer student at the University of Waterloo where many projects require her to show why her proposal is a good one and that the project will work - Kumar believes learning as much as she can about a topic is the best way to prepare for a presentation.

Prepared speeches can suit some people, but for Kumar, taking a passion in a topic allows her to absorb as much information as possible and subsequently speak about it for hours.

"I just really love the community and I'm honoured and super grateful to get the chance to represent it," she said.

One specific area she wants to learn more about is pig farming. Kumar said pigs are incredibly interesting and cute, even if she can't resist the occasional slice of bacon.

She also said the polo centre in Wainfleet is a unique and special place, few exist in Ontario, and despite not riding her yet, has developed a kinship with a horse there named Bellini.

The Wainfleet Agricultural Society promotes local agriculture, with a focus on youth. The society runs the annual fall fair each September.



Jes Kumar showed her first cow, a Jersey named Jolene, at a show earlier this year. Kumar is the Wainfleet Agricultural Society ambassador for 2026. ~ Submitted photos

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A team effort: Excellence in Ag awards honours Ontario's best

By Luke Edwards

Two organizations with ties to Niagara received provincial recognition to close out 2025.

Both Vineland Research and Innovation Centre and the Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers won 2025 Excellence in Agriculture awards presented by Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness Trevor Jones. VRIC won in the research and innovation category, while OGVG won in the promotional category.

"This is absolutely a testament to the amazing staff and the amazing talent. We have a very dedicated and passionate group of people who work here who show up every day working extremely hard," said Darby McGrath, vice president of research and development at VRIC.

"I don't take it lightly accepting the award because I do it on the backs of my staff, these people who are brilliant and motivated and do awesome things every day."

The awards are given out each year at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, and cover a wide variety of categories. They're aimed at both honouring those in the ag industry who are reaching high achievements and also to raise awareness about the importance of the sector.

"I'm proud to recognize the winners and honourable mentions of the 2025 Excellence in Agriculture awards for their hard work and commitment to building a stronger, more competitive agri-food sector," said Jones. "Their contributions drive the success of our sector and pave the way for the next generation, ensuring Ontario agriculture continues to thrive."

McGrath said the award offered some confirmation that they're striving for, and reaching, the right goals. With over 200 crop groups in Ontario, the work at Vineland can be diverse and varied. But that also makes it a challenge.

"We really do try to carry a very diverse portfolio of projects in order to make sure that we are representing as many different things as we possibly can," she said.

Some of the primary work includes developing plant varieties better suited to Ontario's and Canada's growing conditions, though their projects go beyond that.

"Every day we get the little wins along the way, but it's really nice for the team to get to look up and say 'geez, what we're doing is getting recognized outside the projects that we're doing with clients and different collaborators. It's neat to be recognized on that stage,' McGrath said.

Meanwhile, OGVG received recognition in the promotional category for its Greenhouse Goodness campaign, which was launched to educate the public on the benefits of greenhouse-grown produce. First developed in 2024, it included targeted digital advertising, collaboration with influencers, consumer contests and an online and social media presence. In 2025 the organization expanded the campaign, ultimately increasing the overall audience by more than 450,000.

"We are truly honored to have our Greenhouse Goodness campaign recognized with the Excellence in Agriculture award by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Agribusiness," said Rachel Boucher, manager of marketing, public relations and communication for OGVG.

"This prestigious acknowledgment underscores our unwavering commitment to innovation within greenhouse operations and highlights the pivotal role that greenhouse-grown produce



Vineland Research and Innovation Centre won a 2025 Excellence in Agriculture award handed out by the office of Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness Trevor Jones. The organization won in the research and innovation category. ~ Submitted photos



The Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers won an Excellence in Agriculture award in the promotional category.

plays in fostering healthier, more sustainable diets year-round."

Boucher likewise credited the OGVG team for their commitment.

"Winning this award is a testament to our dedication and the collective efforts of our team. It serves as an affirmation of our innovative approach and our relentless pursuit of excellence in promoting the benefits of greenhouse-grown produce," she said.

McGrath said it was a treat to be able to meet with the other award winners and learn about all the work others are doing in Ontario agriculture.

"It's such an interesting time to be working in agriculture," she said.

"There are fantastic innovations happening all across agriculture in Ontario and Canada."

Here are the other award winners:

Minister's Award

- Growing Chefs! Ontario – Middlesex County

Research and Innovation Excellence

- Haven Greens – Regional Municipality of York
- Vineland Research and Innovation Centre – Regional Municipality of Niagara

Food Processing Excellence

- BMKC Canada Inc. – Bruce County

Education Excellence

- Growing Chefs! Ontario – Middlesex County
- Hillmanor Holsteins – Perth County

Promotional Excellence

- Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers – Essex County

Supply Chain Excellence

- Stone Bridge Flour – Bruce County

Indigenous, Métis or Inuit-owned Businesses or Community Excellence

- Alexiou Farms – Simcoe County

Farm Family Excellence

- The Fifty Acre Garden – Simcoe County

Women's Excellence

- Canadian Women in Food – City of Toronto

Youth Excellence

- Konrad Borowski, Beekon – Regional Municipality of Waterloo

Northern Business Excellence

- Northern Wildflowers – Greater Sudbury

2025 Honourable Mentions:

Food Processing Excellence

- Stone Bridge Flour – Bruce County

Education Excellence

- Ontario Farmland Trust and the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development (University of Guelph) – Wellington County

Supply Chain Excellence

- Guelph Poultry Veterinary Services – Wellington County

Farm Family Excellence

- Goldsmith's Farm Market and Bakery – Grey County

Women's Excellence

- Donna Small, Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authority – Municipality of Chatham-Kent
- Hereward Farms – Dufferin County

Northern Business Excellence

- Cornell Farms – Rainy River District 🌱

CCOVI studying two new recently VQA approved grape varieties

By Niagara Farms Staff

Two new grape varieties being tested in Niagara offer promise in both the vineyard and the glass.

Research being conducted at Brock University's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute is exploring how soreli and cabernet volos varieties could be used to fill a growing gap in consumer preferences for lighter, lower alcohol wines. At the same time, the varieties offer the potential to help growers improve sustainability efforts.

"If you look at the demographics, you see the older population is still going for the bold reds, whereas the younger generation is looking for lighter wines," said Jennifer Kelly, a senior scientist of oenology at CCOVI.

"We want to remain aligned with the desires of all consumers and producers - and our research and outreach activities at CCOVI will continue to have that focus - but this new research is really exciting for a new segment of consumers who want environmentally responsible wines with lower sugar and alcohol content."

The two varieties were among the 24 approved for use by the Vintners Quality Alliance last year, though their history traces back to the early 2000s in Europe. They offer stronger disease and cold resistance, and have a shorter ripening season. These qualities mean they're well suited to Niagara's growing conditions, require less pesticide and can create lower-alcohol wines that younger consumers are increasingly seeking.

Only a handful of growers are producing the varieties in Niagara. Fortunately some agreed to sell their limited quantity to CCOVI to allow Kelly and her team to conduct research. This included testing alternative yeast strains, opting for locally isolated strains of *Saccharomyces uvarum* instead of the commercially available strains like *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* species.

Early results are promising.

"These yeasts naturally produce less alcohol because they consume the grape sugars differently," Kelly said. "Instead of turning as much



Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute (CCOVI) graduate student Holly Eaton (left) and CCOVI senior scientist of oenology Jennifer Kelly (right) have discovered how two new-to-Niagara grape varieties can help meet consumer desires for more sustainable grape growing and low-alcohol wines.
~ Brock University photo

sugar into alcohol, they create other compounds - some of which contribute to the wine's overall profile. The result is a lower-alcohol wine that still tastes balanced and expressive."

This could give local wineries yet another avenue to showcase unique local characteristics.

"It is an opportunity to highlight their own microbial terroir, as the yeasts we are utilizing have taken up residency in the winery and may be unique to the vineyard, giving them a regional signature for the winery itself," Kelly said.

On top of that, researchers are looking at ways to remove water and ethanol from wine

using reverse osmosis in a post-fermentation filtration process. This would give winemakers more control over the final product's alcohol level.

"If we desire to drop the alcohol by one or three per cent, we can calculate that and do that accordingly," Kelly said.

The project's 2025 test wines will be bottled in the coming months, at which point the team will recruit a panel to evaluate the wines in Brock's sensory lab. However, master's student Holly Eaton said the new varieties will be familiar to experienced Niagara wine drinkers. The soreli, she said, shares some characteristics with sauvignon blanc.

"You get some of those familiar aromas when smelling it. If people really like Sauvignon Blanc, they will want to try this wine," she says.

The team is planning to share updates on the work at conferences in the CCOVI Lecture Series.

Their work is supported by the provincial government through the Ontario Research Fund Research Excellence grant.

Niagara West MPP Sam Oosterhoff said the research will help keep Niagara's grape and wine industry on the cutting edge.

"With more consumers choosing low-alcohol wines in Ontario and across the globe, our local grape and wine sector needs to innovate and be able to pivot to changing market conditions," he said.

"This ongoing work on new grape varieties and alternative yeast strains at the Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute at Brock University - supported by the Ontario Research Fund - is ensuring local growers and winemakers are staying ahead of the curve." 🌱

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The Comforts go to the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair

By Ann Marie Chechalk

While the Comfort family has been showing sheep at the Royal for close to 100 years, this is the first time David Comfort has shown his sheep in the open breeding show.

In addition to running Brookturn Farm Holsteins with his parents Neil and Margaret and brother in law Brandon, David owns Comfort Sheep with his wife Shauna and son Adam. Adam, who is now the fifth generation with sheep on the farm, including three generations on Twenty Mile Road.

David started his flock 20 years ago with a few ewes and has grown his herd, featuring Southdowns and Polled Dorsets, to his present drove of over 100 head.

With his family's help, the Comfort family participate in showing both breeds at fairs throughout southern Ontario starting Labour Day in Paris and every weekend until Thanksgiving, ending in Rockton. At the fair they show approximately 14 ewes and rams, both lambs and yearlings.

This show season, their yearling Southdown ewe was selected as Supreme Ewe of Paris Fair, Norfolk County Fair and Erin Fall Fair. Their yearling Southdown ram was selected as supreme ram of West Niagara Fair and Rockton World's Fair. As a result, they decided it was time to take on the 103rd Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto.

David has had lambs shown at the Royal in the junior sheep show, but on Nov. 11 the two Southdowns made their way to Toronto to be the first from their flock to be shown in the breeding show.

When the show was completed, the Comfort yearling ram was placed first in his class and awarded reserve grand champion Southdown ram and the Comfort yearling ewe who placed first in her class, was grand champion Southdown ewe and reserve supreme champion ewe of the entire show, second out of 187 sheep.

"Showing at the Royal was a wonderful experience," said Shauna and David. "The camaraderie between each farming family is a unique thing to witness and the support we received to help us be successful meant everything. The animals brought to Toronto are truly the best of the best and to be awarded reserve supreme champion is an enormous honour for our farm."



At the 103rd Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, David Comfort together with his wife Shauna, son Adam and family and friends, celebrated his yearling ewe placing first in her class, and then grand champion Southdown ewe and Reserve Supreme Champion Ewe of the entire show, 2nd out of 187 sheep. ~ Submitted photo

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This Galloway girl puts Wellandport family on the map

SHAK Miracle receives silver in the North America division for Miss World Galloway contest

By Ann Marie Chechalk

Steve and Alison Dawson of Wellandport have owned the SHAK Galloway herd of cows since 2019.

A small herd of “four to six cows and a few babies is generally what we have,” said Alison. “This breed has a tendency to have an easy calving experience and they are hearty for the Canadian environment. They have a wonderful yield on grass and great temperaments. Additionally the Galloway farming family is a supportive, encouraging environment and as first-generation farmers, who have young children, that’s a priceless quality to surround your family. Raising livestock is a challenge at the best of times and having a support network is invaluable.”

Many will remember Steve in the show ring as a 4-H member and will have also seen his daughters showing at the local fairs over the past few years.

But this year was extremely special.

“People from all over the world were looking at Steve’s cow for Miss World Galloway,” said Alison. “As a recipient of a grand champion placing at fair levels, you are allowed to submit and be judged at a national and then international level. We were very flattered and honoured to have been chosen amongst some outstanding nominees.”



Hailey Dawson showing SHAK Miracle at the Erin Fair last year. ~ Alison Dawson photo

SHAK Miracle finished in silver, one point out of gold for the North American division.

“Let’s be honest,” said Alison, “it is Steve’s eye that picks genetic structures and breeding choices, what he has accomplished is very cool

and people around the world are looking at his work. Our goal has always been to enjoy this chapter and to be grateful for this experience. But here is to you Steve Dawson!” 🌱

‘Heartwarming’ remembrance raises \$150K for local food banks

By Luke Edwards

The Vineland Growers Cooperative is known for doing a lot in a short period of time.

During peach season they’re responsible for getting freshly picked peaches off the trees and into grocery store shelves as quickly as possible to allow Canadians across the country to enjoy the delicious summertime treat.

That’s not the organization’s only impressive feat.

Last month they raised \$152,000 with the An Evening of Giving Back event in honour of Debbie Ecker, the late wife of Vineland Growers president Mike Ecker. Debbie was known for her generosity, hosting an annual Christmas fundraiser for 13 years to help struggling families pay the bills and ensure they could enjoy the holiday season as well.

After a brave battle with cancer that ended in 2021, Mike and the Vineland Growers team created An Evening of Giving Back event to fulfill Debbie’s dream of growing her fundraiser into something even more inspirational.

“I am deeply humbled and inspired by what a community can achieve when it comes together,” said Mike in a thank you message to supporters of the event.

“It truly was ‘An Evening of Giving Back.’ I can never fully express my gratitude to everyone who played a part in making this possible.”

Money raised from the event will go to Community Care of West Niagara and FEED Niagara.

“It’s heartwarming that such a wonderful person like Debbie is remembered by so many people through this amazing event,” said Lynda



Mike Ecker, president of Vineland Growers, presents a guitar signed by Blue Rodeo’s Jim Cuddy to Joe Pillitteri during last month’s An Evening of Giving Back fundraiser. Pillitteri, a huge Jim Cuddy fan, was MC for the event and is a supporter of the event, which raised \$152,000 for CCWN and FEED Niagara. ~ Luke Edwards photo

O’Donnell, manager of community engagement for CCWN.

“The Lincoln community and the surrounding Niagara area comes together to raise funds and awareness which helps those in need at this time of year. We feel very fortunate that Debbie started a Christmas fundraiser with her friends many years ago.”

FEED Niagara represents 10 area food banks who are members of Feed Niagara.

“Food banks are under intense pressure right now, with food costs rising and more clients seeking assistance than ever before. Over one million people now visit food banks in Ontario

annually, with visits rising 13 per cent in just the past year alone,” said David Vandersteen, FEED Niagara manager.

“It is only through the incredible efforts of people like Mike Ecker and his amazing team at Vineland Growers that we can strive to meet these rising needs in our community, providing service and support to the people who need it the most.”

The evening took place at the Vineland Growers building on Fourth Avenue in Jordan. It featured food trucks, local wine and beer, a silent auction, music and a few hijinks from Joe Pillitteri, who acted as MC for the evening. 🌱

Niagara goes to the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair



The Niagara dairy club represented the region well at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair. ~ Steve Cappell photo

By Ann Marie Chechalk

Every year the Niagara 4-H dairy clubs vie for a spot on the TD 4-H Classic team that exhibits at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair.

Only members 12 years or older as of Jan. 1 that given year are eligible to show. Since the TD Classic draws 4-H members from across the country, the team is only able to consist of 10 members, eight who show, the alternate and the herds person. As Niagara has two dairy clubs, Wainfleet and Lincoln, all the members of the two clubs are competing for the same 10 spots. This year the 2025 Royal team consisted of: Brooke Eggink, Chloe Mous-Hili, Kevin Angle, Brad Jansema, Emily Knutt, Jaella Smith, Kaylee Hart, Tyler Gilbert, alternate-Arianna Verdonk, and herds person: Janna Furry.

There will be about 450 competitors in total, with Niagara competing against these many other 4-H members.

Kevin Angle attended the RAWF for the second time in his 4-H career.

"With my calf Brookturn Eye Candy Valene from the Comfort family, I had an incredible experience, and a great opportunity to see the excellent cattle and showpeople from across Canada," he said.

"The first day we went in the ring for showmanship, where your hard work training over the summer pays off. While I didn't place amongst the competition, my calf walked very well and that is an important part of showing. The second day was conformation, where Valene placed 15th out of 30 in a strong summer yearling class - a respectable feat!"

Angle said Niagara had a great team this year with members who all pitched in to make

it a successful Royal. He thanked leaders Brad Eggink, Amanda Comfort, and Mark Heeringa.

"(They) all invested a significant amount of time and effort to ensure everything ran smoothly," he said.

He also thanked sponsors Brookturn Holsteins, Ag & Turf Power Service, Country Boys Mobile Food Service, Smithville Home Hardware, and many more.

Arianna Verdonk was the alternate this year.

"Attending the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair was such an amazing experience and working together as a team to represent Niagara. Holding the Niagara sign during group-of-three was quite exciting," she said.

"Many memories were made when tidying the display, washing calves, waking up early, and watching each other show our calves. It was so fun being a part of the team and was cool to see so many calves looking their best and being shown by the people that have put lots of hard work into them."

Morgan McGee breeds Nubian and recorded grade dairy goats under the herd name Chippawa Creek.

"I have been breeding goats for seven years and this year I brought 10 goats (six dry, four milking) to exhibit in the East National Dairy Goat Show at the Royal," she said. "All of the goats that we brought placed in the top 10 in their classes, with four goats winning their classes. We also won junior champion Nubian, junior champion recorded grade, and premier breeder/exhibitor for the recorded grades."

"In addition to the East National show," continued Morgan, "I also competed in the youth dairy goat show, placing third in senior showmanship and my project goat won best bred

and owned of the youth show. I like attending the Royal because it allows me to inform the public about the dairy goats, which is often a forgotten industry in agriculture. I also like talking to more experienced breeders, and learning how to further improve my breeding program. My favourite memory from the Royal is eating dinner with the other goat breeders after a long day of showing."

Frankie's Goats, also well known as Joanne and Scott Battersby's herd of Smithville, not only traveled to the Royal to show under their herd name, but brought animals to allow Niagara 4-H goat club members to show in the open youth dairy goat show.

"We bring our livestock animals for 4-H youth to show," quipped Joanne. "For myself to promote goats in Ontario. We did wonderfully as did Niagara 4-H goat club youth this year. Watching a Niagara 4-H youth take centre stage in the show ring and some to even take grand champion showperson is thrilling."

Quite a contingent went to the Royal this year and made Niagara proud, with Katie Gunn taking first in her age class, Benjamin Chechalk taking third in his class and Gracie Lodewyk was very excited to be named first in senior showmanship and then going on to winning grand champion showperson.

Today, the Royal has grown to be the largest indoor agricultural event in the world. A win at the Royal means something, regardless of whether you're pickling, jamming, raising beef or driving six-horse hitches. Every year, 300,000 people come to the fair to celebrate the very best food, livestock and horsemanship this country has to offer 🌱

And that's a wrap for Niagara 4-H

By Ann Marie Chechalk

While the weather was cold and snowy outside, it was indoors where all the snowmen were being made.

The last day of the 4-H Craft Club took place at the Silverdale Hall on Saturday, Dec. 6 with 12 members attending.

There was lots of crafting of everything snowmen: snowmen mobiles, snowmen cupcakes and snowmen doughnuts. Even wooden candles that technically could be turned into snowmen.

Members were very busy, stopping only for a potluck lunch and a bit of winter bingo.

Will they all be back again when the club starts up in February? Sounds like it. Leaders Annette Noonan and Ann Marie Chechalk have already started thinking about some different crafts. 🍃



Katie Gunn, Benjamin Chechalk, Emily McGee, Annette Noonan (leader), Harper VanMarrum and Hailey Sikkens show off the many things they crafted at their last meeting of the year for the Niagara 4-H Craft Club. ~ Ann Marie Chechalk photos

Keeping the art alive at 13th Street Winery

By Luke Edwards

For the most part, Doug Whitty grew up as a typical farm kid. He preferred tractors to tapes-

tries, dirt to drawings. However, a trip to Toronto where his aunt took him to some of the city's arts and cultural sites opened his eyes. Even if at the time Whitty was hesitant to let it be known to his childhood friends that he'd gone to the ballet to watch The Nutcracker, the trip taught him the value of art, and how it can all connect back to his family's farm.

"We really embraced it," he said. "It's become an important part of our business."

Whitty and his wife Karen run 13th Street Winery in St. Catharines as part of Whitty Farms. They're third-generation farmers, having taken over from Doug's father Joe, son of Charles Whitty, who started a tender fruit business in the early 20th century.

When Doug and Karen opened the winery, they did so in partnership with co-owner John



Art has long been a key pillar of 13th Street Winery. The Whitty family is continuing the tradition started by co-owner John Mann, who founded a gallery at the St. Catharines winery. In the photo, from left: Thomas, Karen and Doug Whitty. ~ Luke Edwards photo

➔ Continued on page A19

Mann, a well-known advocate of the arts. In 2019 he opened an art gallery at the winery, adding to the third pillar to the 13th Street Winery ethos: wine, food and art.

"People have enjoyed this part of the business," said Karen.

However, Mann's death in 2024 created some uncertainty about the future of the gallery.

"John did a really great job establishing this as a really good art gallery," said Doug.

Not wanting to see that disappear, the family discussed their options and eventually decided to keep the gallery alive. And with the help of son Thomas, they've done just that. Looking to carve out his niche with the family business, Thomas began offering wine, food and art tours at the winery.

"We take all these things that people think aren't connected, and show how they are," said Thomas, whose brother Benjamin also works at the winery. A third brother, Luke, works off-farm but continues to support the operation where he can.

Doug said they realized providing value-added options was going to be a necessity in their corner of the agricultural world.

"The arts grew out of that," he said.

Thankfully, support from organizations like Agritourism Ontario and programs like FedDev Ontario's Tourism Growth Program, have helped.

In the gallery, visitors can expect a focus on Canadian art, though it's not exclusively local. However, the works - most of which are available for purchase - of familiar names like Niagara

sculpture artist Floyd Elzinga or landscape painter Jennifer Elliottson adorn the gallery.

Outside, they've developed a sculpture garden for visitors to enjoy, with plans to enhance it in the future.

They're also developing more than just visual arts, with regular live music and three larger shows planned for 2026.

The arts at 13th Street are an important part of the family's business plan, but Karen said it's also about bringing some happiness to visitors.

"The goal is to make your day a little bit better," she said. "Art does make life better."

The winery is located at 1776 Fourth Ave. in St. Catharines. For more information visit 13thstreetwinery.com. 🌱

AG EVENTS ON THE HORIZON

Welcome to 2026! A new year means new resolutions, from losing weight to reading more.

While many Niagarans are spending the month trying to get into new habits, there will still be plenty of time left over to enjoy some ag fun.

Here are a few things to do in the coming weeks:

JANUARY 13-15

DAIRY FARMERS AGM

The province's dairy farmers will get together later this month in Toronto to recap the achievements and challenges of the previous year and look ahead to what's on the horizon in 2026 and beyond.

Taking place at the Fairmont Royal York Hotel in Toronto, the Dairy Farmers of Ontario's AGM starts on **Tuesday, Jan. 13** and wraps up with a closed session for dairy producers only on Thursday, Jan. 15. For more information visit dfoagm.com.

JANUARY 17-18 AND JANUARY 24-25

ICEWINE FESTIVAL

Wine lovers can take part in a popular winter festival while supporting our local grape growers who produce a uniquely Canadian treat.

The Niagara Icewine Festival returns to Niagara-on-the-Lake in January. The Icewine Village will take over Old Town for two weekends, **Jan. 17-18** and **Jan. 24-25**. Visitors can enjoy icewine tastings, culinary pairings and specially created cocktails.

A discovery pass is also available for those who want to visit some of the region's wineries. For more information visit niagarawinefestival.com.

EARLY BIRD SAVINGS BEFORE FEBRUARY 11

OFVC EARLY BIRD TICKET PRICING

Those planning to go to February's Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Convention and looking to save a few bucks still have some time to get their early bird tickets.

Early bird pricing continues until **Feb. 11** for the Feb. 18 and 19 event at the Niagara Falls Convention Centre. It features two days of education sessions on a variety of topics, along with a trade show. For more information, or to register, visit ofvc.ca.

FEBRUARY 7 FEBRUARY 14 APRIL 11

SEEDY SATURDAY

Spring may seem like a long way off, but it's never too early to start planning for the gardening season and Seedy Saturday events can help green thumbs do just that.

Locally, there are a few options: **Feb. 7** - Thorold/NOTL, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Niagara College Greenhouse, and Hamilton, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Hamilton Public Library Centennial Branch; **Feb. 14** - West Niagara, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Grimsby Public Library, and Master Gardeners of Niagara/Fonthill, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Meridian Community Centre in Fonthill; **April 11** - Caledonia, from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at the Caledonia Fairgrounds.

REGISTRATION OPENS THIS MONTH

MARCH CLASSIC ON THE MOVE

A major annual event put on by the Grain Farmers of Ontario is moving to Niagara in 2026. The March Classic features a host of celebrity guest speakers in a full day of presentations at the Niagara Falls Convention Centre.

Confirmed presenters include Arlene Dickinson, Catherine Murray, Eric Termuende and George Stroumboulopoulos. Colin Mochrie and Deb McGrath will also be on hand to keep the crowd entertained.

Registration opens this month. More details can be found online at gfo.ca/march-classic.



An eggs-cellent choice

Many readers out there have likely had more than enough turkey for the time being and could be looking at other ways to get some protein in their diet.

Beef, pork and vegetable alternatives are all great options, but so too are eggs. In Niagara, the egg and poultry sector has quietly been one of the most significant parts of the agricultural industry for decades.

Long a staple for a hearty breakfast, eggs are important in baking but can also be used in a variety of ways on their own.

Here are a few eggs-cellent options to try in the coming weeks and months as we welcome in the new year.



Asparagus and Egg Burritos

Ingredients

- 4 tsp (20 mL) vegetable oil
- 1 small Ontario onion, chopped
- 12 oz (375 g) Ontario asparagus, trimmed and sliced into 1-inch (2.5 cm) pieces
- 1 cup (250 mL) chopped Ontario greenhouse sweet red pepper
- 1 cup (250 mL) drained, rinsed canned black beans
- 1/4 cup (50 mL) salsa
- 6 large Ontario eggs
- 1 cup (250 mL) shredded Ontario cheddar cheese
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) each ground cumin, chili powder and dried oregano leaves
- 1/4 tsp (1 mL) salt
- 4 large (10-inch/25 cm) flour tortillas
- Toppings: Ontario sour cream, salsa, hot sauce

Instructions

In large nonstick skillet, heat 1 tbsp (15 mL) of the oil over medium heat. Add onion, asparagus and red pepper, cook, stirring occasionally, for about 7 minutes, until asparagus is tender.

Meanwhile, in small bowl, combine beans and salsa; set aside. In medium bowl, whisk eggs until blended. Whisk in 1/4 cup (50 mL) of the cheese, cumin, chili powder, oregano and salt; pour into skillet over vegetables. Cook, stirring gently, for about 3 minutes, until eggs are set.

Spoon egg mixture in centre of each tortilla; top with bean mixture. Sprinkle with remaining cheese. Fold up bottom of tortillas over filling, fold in sides; roll up tightly. Brush tortillas with remaining oil.

Wipe skillet clean; heat over medium heat. Add burritos seam side down, cook for about 6

minutes, turning once, until golden. Serve with toppings.



Poached Eggs in Curried Tomato Sauce

Ingredients

- 2 tbsp (25 mL) vegetable oil
- 1 medium Ontario onion, chopped
- 2 large cloves Ontario garlic, crushed
- 4 tsp (20 mL) curry powder
- 2 tsp (10 mL) salt
- 1/4 tsp (1 mL) cayenne powder (optional)
- 6 large Ontario greenhouse tomatoes (about 3 lb/1.5 kg), coarsely chopped
- 6 Ontario eggs
- 6 cups (1.5 L) hot cooked rice (preferably basmati)
- 1 cup (250 mL) chopped fresh coriander or parsley

Instructions

In large skillet, heat oil over medium heat. Add onion and garlic; cook stirring constantly, for 2 to 3 minutes or until softened and golden; but not browned. Add curry powder, salt and cayenne powder (if using); cook for 1 minute. Add tomatoes and bring to boil; reduce heat to medium, cover and cook for 5 to 7 minutes to blend flavours.

Break each egg into custard cup and slide carefully into sauce, keeping yolk intact. Cover and cook over medium-low heat for 5 to 7 minutes or until egg whites are firm and yolks are just set but still soft. Serve sauce and eggs on hot rice; sprinkle generously with coriander.



Bacon, Egg and Cheese Muffins

Ingredients

- 1 small Ontario onion, diced
- 1/3 cup (75 mL) each diced Ontario sweet red and green pepper
- 1/3 cup (75 mL) vegetable oil
- 2 cups (500 mL) all-purpose flour
- 1/4 cup (50 mL) cornmeal
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) granulated sugar
- 1 tsp (5 mL) baking powder
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) each baking soda and salt
- 1/4 tsp (1 mL) each pepper and dried thyme
- 1 cup (250 mL) shredded sharp (aged) Ontario cheddar cheese
- 1/2 cup (125 mL) diced cooked Ontario bacon (4 slices)
- 1 Ontario egg
- 1-1/4 cups (300 mL) Ontario milk

Instructions

In microwavable bowl, combine onion, red and green peppers and oil. Cover and cook on High for 1 to 1-1/2 minutes to soften. Set aside.

In large bowl, combine flour, cornmeal, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, salt, pepper and thyme. Stir in cheese and bacon. In another bowl, lightly beat egg; stir in milk. Add milk mixture and vegetable mixture to dry mixture and stir just until moistened.

Spoon batter into greased muffin cups. Bake in 375°F (190°C) oven for 15 to 18 minutes or until toothpick inserted in centre comes out clean. Let cool in pan on rack 5 minutes; turn muffins out to cool completely.

Tip: Try diced ham or smoked sausage instead of bacon.



Huevos Rancheros

Ingredients

- 2 tsp (10 mL) vegetable oil



- 1 Ontario onion, chopped
- Half Ontario greenhouse sweet yellow pepper, chopped
- 2 cups (500 mL) chopped Ontario greenhouse tomatoes
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) tomato paste
- 1 tsp (5 mL) ground cumin
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) dried oregano leaves
- Pinch each salt and pepper
- 4 Ontario eggs
- 4 corn tortillas
- 1/4 cup (50 mL) shredded aged Ontario cheddar cheese
- 2 tbsp (25 mL) fresh Ontario coriander, chopped (optional)
- Hot sauce, optional

Instructions

In large nonstick skillet, heat oil over medium heat. Add onion and yellow pepper and cook, stirring occasionally until slightly softened, about 3 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, tomato paste, cumin, oregano, salt and pepper; bring to boil and cook for 2 minutes, stirring constantly.

With the back of a large spoon, make 4 wells in sauce. Break egg into each well. Reduce heat to medium-low or low; cover and cook until eggs are firm, 4 to 6 minutes.

Heat tortillas in microwave until warm, about 20 seconds. Place 1 tortilla on each plate. Place egg on each tortilla. Divide sauce over egg, sprinkle with cheese, and coriander, if using. Serve with hot sauce, if desired.



Mini Veggie Quiche with Potato Crust

Ingredients

Crust:

- 2 tbsp (25 mL) melted butter

- 3 Ontario potatoes (about 1 lb/500 g), peeled and coarsely grated (about 2 cups/500 mL)
- 1 Ontario Onion, minced
- 1 Ontario large egg, lightly beaten
- 2 tbsp (25 mL) all-purpose flour
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) each salt and pepper

Filling:

- 2 tbsp (25 mL) butter
- 1 cup (250 mL) sliced Ontario mushrooms
- 1 cup (250 mL) finely shredded Ontario cabbage
- 1/4 cup (50 mL) each diced Ontario onion and carrot
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) dried thyme leaves
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) salt
- 2/3 cup (150 mL) Ontario milk
- 2/3 cup (150 mL) Ontario sour cream
- 3 Ontario large eggs, lightly beaten
- 3/4 cup (175 mL) shredded Swiss-style cheese
- 1/4 tsp (1 mL) pepper
- 1/4 tsp (1 mL) ground nutmeg (optional)
- 1/4 tsp (1 mL) sweet paprika

Instructions

Crust: Brush 12 cups of nonstick muffin pan generously with melted butter (see Tips).

In bowl, combine potatoes, onion, egg, flour, salt and pepper; divide among muffin cups, pressing evenly up sides and over bottoms. Bake in 400°F (200°C) oven for 20 to 25 minutes until crisp-browned at edges. Reduce oven to 350°F (180°C).

Filling: Meanwhile, in medium nonstick skillet, melt butter over medium-high heat. Cook mushrooms, cabbage, onion, carrot, thyme and 1/4 tsp (1 mL) of the salt, stirring for about 5 minutes, until soft. Let cool slightly.

In bowl, whisk together milk, sour cream, eggs, pepper, nutmeg, if using, and remaining salt.

Sprinkle cheese into potato crusts, dividing equally; spoon vegetable mixture on top. Pour in milk mixture. Sprinkle tops with paprika.

Bake in 350°F (180°C) oven for 30 to 35 minutes or until top is set and knife inserted in centre comes out clean. Let cool in pan on rack slightly; run knife around edges to remove from pan. Serve warm or at room temperature.



Maple Ham and Asparagus Strata

Ingredients

- 10 to 12 stalks Ontario asparagus (approx 2 cups/500 mL)
- 1 whole wheat baguette (325 g approx)
- 1 cup (250 mL) finely diced maple ham
- 2 cups (500 mL) shredded light cheese (Havarti, Swiss, Parmesan, Cheddar, Friulano or a blend)
- 1/4 cup (50 mL) finely chopped green onion
- 3 Ontario eggs
- 3 Ontario egg whites
- 2-1/2 cups (625 mL) 1% Ontario milk
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) Dijon mustard
- 1/4 tsp (1mL) each salt and pepper
- 2 tbsp (25 mL) grated Parmesan cheese (optional)

Instructions

Wash and trim asparagus. Place in shallow heatproof dish and cover with boiling water for 2 minutes. Drain and rinse under cold water. Chop remaining stalks into 1-inch (2.5 cm) pieces to make about 2 cups (500 mL).

Cut or tear baguette into cubes; spread in greased 13- x 9-inch (3 L) baking dish. Evenly spread chopped asparagus, ham and shredded cheese in dish; sprinkle with green onions.

In bowl, beat eggs with egg whites. Add milk, mustard, salt and pepper; pour over bread mixture, pressing and smoothing top. Cover and refrigerate for at least 4 hours and for up to 12 hours. Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese (if using). Bake in 350°F (180°C) oven for 1 hour or until golden. Let stand for 10 minutes before serving. 🌿

Saddle club wraps up year with a celebration

New members welcome, first horse show takes place in May

By Ann Marie Chechalk

The West Niagara Saddle Club celebrated the end of another successful year with a catered dinner and a few awards. Anyone interested in joining and coming out to the horse shows in the New Year are welcome. Shows are held at the West Niagara Fairgrounds horse ring.

Everyone that competes at the saddle club has to be a member. Come out to the first show and sign up.

The show dates for 2026 are May 10, June 21, July 19, Aug. 9, Sept. 20. In case of rain date is Oct. 11.

Taking home a few prizes-High Point Rider W.N.S.C 2025-Cassie Moses. R U High Point Rider W.N.S.C 2025-Selena Lopez. High Point Horse W.N.S.C 2025-Worth the Wait. For more information WNSC can be found on Facebook. 🌿



Members of the West Niagara Saddle Club held a dinner and awards night to celebrate the end of another successful year. ~ Submitted photo

‘You can’t save your way to profitability’: Wheat Pete cautions against cutting back too much

By Luke Edwards

When times are tough, the impulse to cut back spending can get strong. But last month the man they call Wheat Pete encouraged farmers to avoid falling too far into that trap.

Telling those who attended the Ontario Soil and Crop Association’s Ag Summit meeting in Ancaster that it’s hard to save your way to profitability, Pete Johnson offered some tips to save some dollars, but more importantly provided advice on how to ensure the money they spend is being put to the best use.

And a lot of it has to do with being honest with oneself.

“You have to look back on your own farm operations over the last one or two years and ask, ‘what went wrong?’” he said.

“You want to be more profitable, you just need to be a better farmer.”

Despite the moniker, Johnson’s presentation focused on corn. A successful crop depends first and foremost on the number of stalks.

“You’ve got to start with enough plants,” he said, promoting a 34-33-32 system where farmers drop 34,000 seeds per acre, with the hope that 33,000 will germinate and grow, and 32,000 will produce harvestable cobs.

Hitting those targets is the first step to achieving the goal of 300 bushels per acre.

One way to be more efficient with seeds is to be more aware of a field’s surroundings.

“(We should) stop farming acres that lose us money every year,” he said. For instance, yields drop significantly close to neighbouring bushland. Johnson said farmers shouldn’t expect high yields as far out as 30 feet on the north edge of a bush, and 10 feet on the south edge.

Instead, he recommended either dropping fewer seeds, or planting something else that’s harvestable. The goal is to not feed the deer, but also to ensure the forest doesn’t creep out towards the field.

Johnson also advised farmers to be more cognizant of rotations.

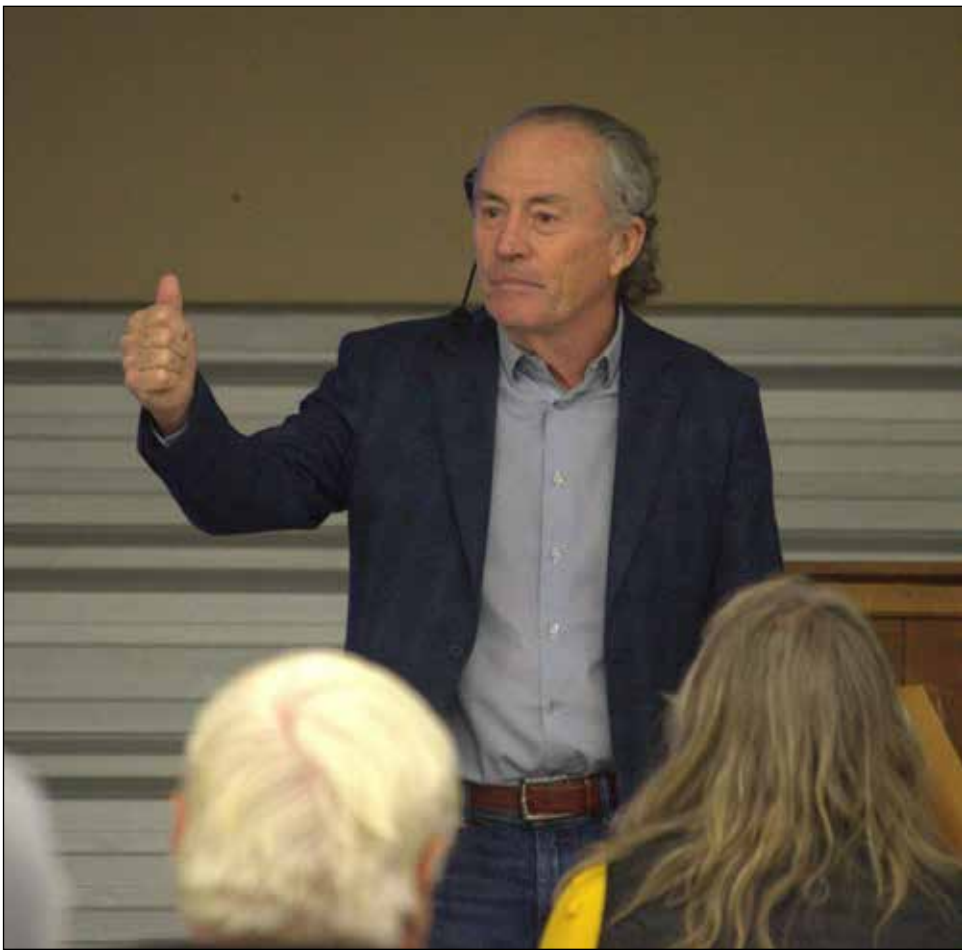
“If you want to cut costs, the first thing you do is rotate,” he said.

“Crop sequencing is one way to increase yield.”

A careful review of tilling practices can also help.

“Corn doesn’t need as much tillage as we think,” he said.

On the fertilizer front, he said knowing a field’s soil composition is the first step in understanding how a farmer can cut back on input costs. He recommended doing one soil test per rotation, but



Pete Johnson, also known as Wheat Pete, shared some thoughts on how to improve profitability with farmers attending the Ontario Soil and Crop Association’s Ag Summit last month in Ancaster. ~ Luke Edwards photo

no more than four years apart. and tests should be done at the same time each rotation.

“You can’t go to zero starter, but you certainly can reduce rates,” he said. In many cases farmers can cut back on sulfur, zinc and magnesium.

On the technology front, Johnson said automatic row shutoffs can pay for themselves quickly.

“They save you seed, and make you money,” he said. 🌱

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