

# Atlantic Canada Best Practices Mission to Southern Ontario June 9–14, 2024



## Summary of Key Learnings



## Introduction

Welcome to the learning takeaways report for the TIANS best practice mission. We were thrilled to show you some of the best culinary and agritourism experiences in Southern Ontario. We hope that the mission inspired you and provided you with new ideas that you can bring to your region and tourism operations. In this report we have compiled key learnings from the trip to help you incorporate your learnings into the work you are already doing. The report has four sections:

- Learning themes with best practice examples
- Experience development examples
- Notes from tourism organization speakers
- Resources

## Key Learning Themes and Examples

Throughout the trip we heard from tourism operators who explained how they developed their culinary experiences and shared some of their best practices. This section shares seven learning themes and a variety of best practices operators shared with us to support these themes.

### Collaboration and partnerships grow businesses and the community

Many operators shared how they collaborate with other businesses, their DMO and regional tourism organizations to develop their culinary tourism experiences. We also heard how partnerships are not only good for business but they also help to build community.

#### Examples:

- Cynthia at **Maison Maitland** has incorporated local businesses into her business. For example she works with a local florist and masseuse. She also reached out to her regional tourism organization to get access to funding to help her renovate her kitchen and gites.
- **Littlejohn Farm** has partnered with local hotels who will refer visitors to the farm
- **Black Dog Hospitality Group** encourages other restaurants to become FeastOn certified to support the local food movement and grow industry collaboration
  - Tim Pater also shared that their relationship with Visit Kingston is valuable because through events like Kingstonlicious, their restaurants is marketed and helps to grow their business

- **Kingston Food Tours** works with restaurants to create a packaged product tourism product
- Cheryl from **Udderly Ridiculous** emphasized the importance of community and collaboration in their experience. Examples of how they collaborate include:
  - Working with a partner who uses their wool
  - Local ingredient partnerships for ice cream flavours, such as working with a brewery in the region on a beer-flavoured ice cream
  - Providing visitors with picnic experiences featuring local products
- **SixThirtyNine Restaurant** has made supporting local one of its core values and makes efforts to cross-promote other local partners. They also demonstrate their commitment to supporting local through participating in the Feast On Certification.
- Meredith Maywood from **Tourism Oxford** talked to the group about the importance of establishing connections and fostering collaboration at the destination level. Efforts her team has undertaken include building connections between cycling, wellness and culinary assets. She also spoke about efforts to overhaul the Cheese Trail as a criteria-based product and getting the business community behind the brand.
- **Visit Kingston** spoke about the need to have strategy when developing partnerships. The strategy helps all partners become aligned and it also helps guide you to make sure you are selecting the right partners.
- **Ottercreek Woodworks**, a non-culinary business, makes food a part of its experience by collaborating with local partners (like Thrive bakery in Norfolk County who supplies their cookies)
- The **Niagara Benchlands DMO** is an excellent example of collaboration at the regional-level between municipalities. The Town of Lincoln and City of St. Catharines formed the DMO recently in order to leverage each other's strengths and create a more comprehensive destination.
- **RTO9** works with various organizations to recommend local restaurants. They are currently working on a project with Great Lakes Cruises to recommend restaurants their passengers should visit.

## Using culinary and agritourism to diversify revenue streams

Many of the business operators we visited shared that tourism helped to diversify their business offerings and grow their businesses. It is possible to be a farm, a winery, a restaurant or accommodation and include culinary tourism experiences.

### Examples:

- **Ottercreek Woodworks** created its visitor experience as a way to diversify revenue of its carpentry business. David still operates as a wood shop most of the time, and targets doing 6-8 visitor experiences per month, 8 months of the year. This illustrates that not all tourism operators have to be full-time businesses to provide an excellent experience.
- **13th Street Winery** has a number of ways that it diversifies its revenue, including through focusing on food service, retailing frozen prepared meals, and building whole-house accommodations. Within the wine business specifically, it diversifies by focusing on wine by the glass and a wine club subscription service.
- **Wild Lot Farm Distillery** started as a farm and distillery and grew into offering tasting experiences, events and opportunities to enjoy the farm.
- Farm tours and culinary experiences helps **Littlejohn Farm** cover the costs of their farm operation. Selling products at Farmers Markets and to restaurants would not be enough income to cover costs.
- **Maison Maitland** added gites (villas) to their property to be able to attract tourists for culinary experiences who may live far away and to increase revenue.

## Storytelling is a powerful way to market experiences and make them memorable

We heard stories about how businesses were started, the history of the land or place, how a product is made. Throughout the trip, everyone started to recognize that the story tends to be the thing that people will remember and take away from their visit. Businesses and destinations are encouraged to find their story and make sure that visitors know about it.

### Examples:

- Cheryl from **Udderly Ridiculous** emphasized the importance of storytelling and education. This is especially important in agritourism where you need to educate people about the challenges faced by farmers. You also have the responsibility in agritourism to educate people about how to treat animals.
- **Ottercreek** spoke about how to develop a story. We have included more notes on this in the experience development section.
- Throughout our tour of the **Royal Hotel**, we were told about features of the hotel which helped us to appreciate their attention to detail. For example, they

mentioned that they make their own soaps and lotions using products from Edwin County Farms. They also spent time to explain architectural and design features such as where they got their materials from and how things were made.

- **Littlejohn Farm** did an excellent job sharing stories as they walked us through the farm. These stories included explaining what products are growing, how they tend to the farm and when things are harvested.
- **The Frontenac Club** incorporated the names of famous Kingston people into the names of their rooms. In each room they had postcards describing the person and why they were important. This helped to give a sense of Kingston and its people.

### Human resources challenges can be overcome

On our trip we visited rural locations and destinations that experience seasonal tourism. With these challenges, it can often be difficult to find enough staff. Throughout the trip, operators shared some of their best practices for attracting and retaining workers. Some of these practices included:

- **Dispatch Restaurant** pays its staff a living wage. This provides staff with consistent, predictable income. They have developed food and beverage retail products, cocktail classes and catering to increase the restaurant's revenue to support this compensation model.
- The **Royal Hotel** shared that they own two houses that they use to provide 14 seasonal staff members with accommodations
- **Maison Maitland** has strategic operating hours where the business is only open certain days of the week to meet staffing levels
- **Kingston Food Tours** provides flexible schedules that meet the needs of their workers
- At the **Frontenac Club**, employees were cross-trained on multiple roles so that they could step in and help when needed. For example, servers helped out with the check-in and check-out process
- Carol Greenwood from TIAO spoke about the [Tourism Workforce Sustainability Program](#), which topped-up tourism jobs to living wage and included training for staff and managers. This program also required businesses to paths to growth so employees could see their career advancement opportunities. Carol also spoke about the Tourism Mentor Match program which matches people with people who look like them in the industry.
- **SixThirtyNine** restaurant staff are trained to be knowledgeable but friendly and to tell the story of their food and partnerships. The focus on training their staff has led to increased retention.
- **13th Street Winery** was able to raise their staff's confidence and pride of working at 13th Street by collaborating with a Michelin star restaurant.

## Destinations are leveraging certifications to grow business standards and attract visitors

We heard from Visit The County and Visit Kingston that they are encouraging their operators to obtain certifications. Certifications help to provide benchmarks for businesses and increase the quality of the experiences provided to visitors.

### Examples:

- Rebecca Mackenzie shared that **Visit The County** is developing a Taste Trail where businesses must have completed **ambassador training programs** and obtain at least 1 certification such as GreenStep, Living Wage, Rainbow Registered, Ontario by Bike or FeastON.
- **Visit Kingston** is Rainbow Registered, Green Step Certified and a Culinary Tourism Alliance member. They share these certifications and memberships as badges on their websites and encourages businesses to also obtain them.
- Tim Pater from **Black Dog Hospitality Group** shared how the FeastON certification provides assurance to visitors that they are purchasing local food because of the audit process that occurs.

## Digitalization helps to make destinations and experiences more attractive to tourists

Throughout the trip, business operators shared how they are using digital technology to attract tourists and improve their visitor experience. Below are a few examples of how digital technology is being used:

- Meredith Maywood from Tourism Oxford offers wraparound supports focused on getting businesses in the community digital-ready. They **incentivize the adoption of digital technology** by giving businesses deadlines for getting online booking and ticketing platforms and apps by offering photography and media visits.
- Maison Maitland developed a [video for their website](#) and social media to help show what their experience looks and feels like.
- Wild Lot Farm Distillery uses **QR codes** to be able to read menus on your phone
- Littlejohn Farm advertises [experiences on their website](#) with a **booking calendar** so that visitors can book a **time-bound experience** without needed to speak to someone
- Kingston Food tours **advertises tours on their website** and they must be booked online. When 1 tour fills up, a new tour gets released online that will run 30 minutes later.
- Frontenac Club has **photos** of every room listed on their website
- The Picton Harbour Inn uses **key codes** rather than room cards to get into rooms

- **Certification badges on websites.** Visit Kingston has the Rainbow Registered badge on their website, Black Dog Tavern has the FeastON certificate on the website, 13th Street Winery has the Sustainable Wine Growing Certificate badge on their website.

### **Incorporating environmental sustainability practices**

Sustainability is more than a buzzword. A recent study found that [70% of Canadian travelers](#) want to travel more sustainably. In addition, the tourism industry has an obligation to work towards achieving the [2030 Sustainable Development Goals](#). We have compiled some examples of how business operators and tourism organizations are working towards sustainability.

- Carol Greenwood spoke about TIAO's efforts to encourage environmental sustainability in the tourism industry through bringing the [Impact Conference](#) to Ontario to create a forum for the industry to learn and discuss sustainability.
- Joanne Wolnik from SWOTSI (RTO1) explained that tourism organizations need to **lead by example** to get businesses to take environmental sustainability seriously. This can include taking the lead in pursuing certifications like Green Step.
- David from Ottercreek Woodworks explained that tourism operators have a responsibility to consider environmental sustainability, not just in their own practices, but through **educating visitors** and encouraging them to change their behaviours: "Tourism needs to be a force for good and not extractive — not just good for community but for nature, through education."
- **Purchasing local food** and using the FeastON certification to incentivize more restaurants to participate
- Reducing waste by **using reusable materials**
- Getting audited and assessed by **GreenStep**

## Experience Development

Throughout the trip we were able to participate in a variety of culinary and agritourism experiences. Here are some examples of how the operators we visited developed their experiences.

- SixThirtyNine developed a [chef's table experience](#) where guests book ahead and they sit in the back at a counter overlooking the kitchen
- Tourism Oxford developed a **cheese trail**. They have also included a cheese makers day and educational sessions to enhance the experience.
- Udderly Ridiculous takes the view that it's their job to facilitate memories, joy and learning. They also use **rapid prototyping** to develop their experiences.
- Wild Lot Farm Distillery **each year will add to the experiences that they offer**. They started just with the distillery products, then added events at the farm, followed by building a wedding space. This slow and steady process allows them to make sure they are ready to take on new experiences.
- Littlejohn Farm grew from being a farmstead B&B to a farm with culinary experiences. They offer **farm walks, tours, picnic offerings, farm dinners** as well as corporate team building experiences for 10 - 50 people.
- Kingston Food tours was created to help fill a gap in Kingston's tourism offerings in the winter. They offer **2 different types of food tours** and they keep their tour packages the same (food offerings and timing), to make it easier for restaurant operators to participate. It also makes it a lot easier to organize.

### David from Ottercreek Woodwork's suggestions for building a great experience:

- How are you going to welcome people into your community?
  - Grounding and setting the stage to create a sense of place
  - Have people serve themselves
  - Emphasize connection
  - Include elements of reconciliation
- Establish the *what, where, how and why*
  - *What?* Make a charcuterie board
  - *Where?* Shop and Carolinian forest
  - *How?* Storytelling and using grandfather's tools
  - *Why?* "I've grown personally because of this experience" - making the visitor feel like they're at home. This can be done by sharing personal stories, welcoming people and telling the story of your community.
- Important to include local suppliers in storytelling
- Hold a lot of info back so people are surprised
- Try to get guests to act a certain way by giving them expectations and responsibilities (e.g. making and serving tea).
- It's your responsibility to make guests care about a place.
- Include cozy elements e.g. Tea and Blankets



## How 13th Street Winery became one of the most visited wineries in Canada:

- 13<sup>th</sup> Street Winery worked to extend the length of the experience
  - People used to just visit for 15 minutes while visiting 8-10 other wineries.  
Now people stay 1.5-2.5 hours
- Focuses on differentiating itself. They have created 12 acres that people can have wine and explore, including a 3-acre sculpture garden and an art gallery. It is a space where people can feel comfortable to wander alone
- Integration with art helps to diversify audience
  - When you diversify offering you diversify your audience
  - Art appeals to food connected consumer — especially when it interconnects and aligns with core values
- 13<sup>th</sup> Street uses the colour white to create a sense of welcoming and calming. They use colour to help things pop
- The bistro is designed to make service simple and fast - menu very focused and tight - 2 mains, 2 salads, 5-6 shareable plates
- Mound with ramp for accessibility and view of property
- Hosts major events like the Handmade Market (14,000-15,000 visitors over two weekends)
- 13<sup>th</sup> Street is now one of the most visited wineries in Canada, despite being only a medium-sized winery

## Notes from Tourism Organization Speaker Talks

### Visit Kingston - Megan Knott, CEO

#### How Kingston Approaches Culinary Tourism

Megan Knott shared that culinary tourism is important to Kingston because every tourist needs to eat. It is also the one sector that exists everyday of the year. Megan also mentioned that people like to celebrate and learn about food and will often be willing to spend money on it. It is smart to lean into that and ensure that a destination makes it easier for tourists to know where to eat and provide experiences to learn more about food.

In 2018, Tourism Kingston worked with the Culinary Tourism Alliance to build a culinary strategy. The strategy included developing activities like [Kingstonlicious](#), promoting restaurant patios, creating a [farm day event](#), building [eat + drink packages](#), building a food event directory and growing the number of restaurants using local food through FeastON certification. Megan shared that having a strategy is integral because it makes it easier to grow and build partnerships. Visit Kingston has identified several pillars (sustainability, LGBTQ2+IA friendly etc.) that guide the organization and each one has its own dedicated strategy. Visit Kingston also ensures that they are consistently measuring the impact of their activities to ensure that they are on track with their strategy. For example, Visit Kingston measures their culinary strategy by capturing data that measures the impact of Kingstonlicious and will then share the impact with partners.

Learn more about Visit Kingston's culinary offerings:

<https://www.visitkingston.ca/culinary/>

### Regional Tourism Organization 9 - Bonnie Ruddock, Executive Director

#### Development of Regional Tourism Organizations and how they support culinary tourism

In 2009, the Ontario government reviewed Ontario's tourism industry. The study recommended creating tourism regions, each led by a [regional tourism organization](#), to make Ontario's tourism industry stronger and more competitive. As a result, Ontario's Ministry of Tourism created 13 regional tourism organizations.

Regional tourism organizations (RTOs) are independent, not-for-profit organizations led by the tourism sector. They play an important role in fostering competitive and viable tourism regions across Ontario. RTOs provide regional leadership and support a coordinated and collaborative approach that maximizes resources, encourages strategic planning and investment, and results in stronger marketing with better reach. Each regional tourism organization (RTO) receives yearly funding. Steady funding

encourages stronger partnerships and a coordinated approach to product development, regional planning and marketing.

RTO9 works closely with operators, DMOs, sector organizations and Destination Ontario. Bonnie shared that RTO9 often works with culinary operators to provide them with guidance and funding to grow their experiences. An example included Maison Maitland. They helped fund a kitchen renovation so that more people could participate in cooking classes.

## Resources

### Trip Photos

Visit [this link](#) to see photos from our trip. You are welcome to add in any photos you may have.

### Certification programs mentioned

Here are some links to things the Culinary Tourism Alliance Team mentioned throughout the trip.

#### **Sustainable Winegrowing Ontario**

In 2007, the Ontario Craft Wineries (OCW) and Grape Growers of Ontario (GGO) worked in partnership to create the Sustainable Winemaking Ontario: An Environmental Charter for the Wine Industry and the Ontario Viticulture Sustainability Certification Program. These proactive programs were developed for wineries and vineyards to provide information on environmental requirements and identify new sustainable opportunities while complying with existing government regulations. In 2017, SWO Certified standards became an accredited certification. The SWO certified logo can be found on Ontario certified wines.

<https://sustainablewinegrowingontario.ca/>

#### **FeastON Certification**

An Ontario local food certificate created to drive purchases of Ontario grown food. The certification is for restaurants and food experiences, growers and producers as well as food distributors and sector organizations. Business operators on the trip mentioned that they like the FeastON certification because it is audited and prevents greenwashing. It also helps to provide networking opportunities for businesses.

<https://www.culinarytourismalliance.com/feast-on>

## Rainbow Registered

Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC) and Tourism HR Canada collaborated to launch the Rainbow Registered Accreditation Program for 2SLGBTQI+ friendly businesses and organizations. Many of the businesses and DMOs featured on our trip are Rainbow Registered.

<https://cglcc.ca/programs/rainbow-registered/>

## GreenStep Sustainable Tourism Certification

GreenStep provides assessments, programs, and certifications to help tourism destinations and businesses measure and improve their sustainability performance.

<https://www.greensteptourism.com/>

## Living Wage Employer

Ontario has a Living Wage certificate program administered through the [Ontario Living Wage Network](#). A living wage reflects what people need to earn to cover the actual costs of living in their community. The certificate program audits employers to ensure that they are paying their team members a living wage. Businesses that having a living wage certificate shows customers that the business recognizes that paying a living wage constitutes a critical investment in the long-term prosperity of the economy by fostering a dedicated, skilled and healthy workforce. A handful of provinces across the country also have living wage certification programs.

Below are calculated living wages in the Atlantic provinces.

Province	Wage	Year	Source
Newfoundland	\$23.80 to \$26.80	2023	<a href="#">Canadian Policy and Alternatives Option</a>
New Brunswick	\$19.55	2020	<a href="#">Canadian Policy and Alternatives Option</a>
Prince Edward Island	\$19.30	2020	<a href="#">Canadian Policy and Alternatives Option</a>
Nova Scotia	\$16.80 to \$21.80	2020	<a href="#">Canadian Policy and Alternatives Option</a>

## Strategy Reports

### Ontario Culinary Tourism Strategy

<https://destinationcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Ontario-Culinary-Tourism-Strategy.pdf>

### Tourism HR Strategy

<https://tourismhr.ca/labour-market-information/reports/workforce-strategy/>

### Tourism Industry Association of Ontario Do What You Love Program

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OfIkjJWLzR7vpf8ScMKTEr4AhUE1fCbH/view?usp=sharing>

### Tourism Workforce Sustainability Program

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OcKaQRRwQpCeUS-zvci5aFjkEeb1cWVA/view?usp=sharing>

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