

University of Guelph Leads Ethno-Cultural Foods Research

The University of Guelph is taking the lead on a groundbreaking area of research involving ethno-cultural foods. The study will examine the consumption patterns of ethnic Canadians and establish the market demand for ethnic produce in Ontario. Once demand has been established, the researchers will be able to provide advice to farmers on the earning potential of growing ethnic vegetables.

Research is currently taking place in the Greater Toronto Area by interviewing immigrants from three major ethnic groups: Chinese, South Asian and Afro-Caribbean. These groups were selected for their strong recent growth and market potential. Probability sampling techniques are being used to determine vegetable preferences, expenditures, acculturation and background information of respondents. Once the data has been collected, a thorough analysis will enable researchers to understand the behaviour of consumers of ethnic vegetables and estimate the demand for these items. Scientific results will demonstrate to farmers the potential demand and market for ethnic vegetables.

The recent explosion of immigrant populations in Ontario has had a tremendous effect on the demand for ethnic foods and produce. Opportunities have become available for farmers to increase their income by becoming involved in the production of ethno-cultural food. If farmers are able to capture this niche marketing opportunity there is great potential for profit in an otherwise highly competitive industry.

When new immigrants arrive in Canada, they seek things that remind them of home. Food is more than a source of energy and nutrients; it is a reflection of cultural values. Market research has shown that there is a shortage of supply for these vegetables owing to a dramatic increase in transportation costs both in North America and internationally. Producers in Ontario should take advantage of this opportunity and provide fresh, high quality vegetables for ethnic residents. This practice will also tie into the local food movement, as farmers will supply a wide variety of produce that is appealing to ethnic consumers.

This project is a collaboration between a number of stakeholders and has been made possible through the Ontario Market Investment Fund (OMIF). The initiative has been supported by the Centre for Land and Water Stewardship (CLAWS), Greater Toronto Area Agriculture Action Committee (GTAAAC), Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) and FarmStart. The team is composed of individuals from the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development (SEDRD) at the University of Guelph, and coordinated by Professor Glen Filson and Dr. Dele Adekunle. Collaborators from FarmStart include Program Manager Sridharan Sethuratnam and Consultant/ Outreach Coordinator Asumani Serugendo. Graduate Research Assistants have also contributed greatly to the execution of the research, and include Joy Sammy, Pradip Dey, Helena Kifle and Jason Tran. An Undergraduate Research Assistant, Nichele Palen, has also played a role in the research project and drafting of this article.