

## SPOTLIGHT

## A Passion for Homegrown Good Taste

### Farmgate Markets Deli & Fresh Meats

By Debra Bagshaw

**F**armgate Markets opened in St. Thomas in 2004 with a vision to be a meat shop of unparalleled excellence. In 2010, they received a Premier's Award for Agri-Food Innovation Excellence, for offering customers "a full range of fresh meats, sausage and deli meats in a line that appeals to people looking for a health-conscious, Ontario-grown option." (This Premier's Award recognizes that farmers have always been innovative in the running of their businesses and is intended to foster even greater innovation across the province's agri-food sector.) Increasing demand led to Farmgate's recent expansion and relocation — it's another milestone, and an indicator of their success in providing something deliciously special to the local area.

As the name suggests, the farm connection is central to the Farmgate philosophy. The business is the brainchild of Elgin County farmer, Sandy Lyle. The Lyle farm business was established near St. Thomas by Sandy's grandfather in 1910. In the hundred years since, family members have been recognized for their commitment to local farming, farming organizations, and the community. In the 90s, the Lyle family operated an on-farm retail outlet for their beef and pork. After the decision was made to close the store, Sandy continued to envision a farm-gate-style meat shop in which he would be actively involved.

He sought a butcher-partner with a similar vision and the ability and passion to help make it a reality. He found that person in Ray Coddington, a Certified Butcher Specialist who had trained with three master butchers from Germany. Before Ray met Sandy, he had developed recipes for several superior deli specialties. They required a little more time and labour, and were lean and lower in salt. They were also made without fillers, phosphates or by-products,



Sandy Lyle (second from the left) and Ray Coddington (second from the right) lead a dedicated team of professionals

and since they contained no chemical additives, were dependent upon close proximity of the production facility to market. He and Sandy agreed it was this uncompromising quality that they wanted to offer, using Ontario-only meats.

From the beginning, Farmgate won fans with a nicely presented fresh meat counter, tasty ready-to-cook items, deli selections with unprocessed flavour and different texture profiles, a lineup of incredible fresh sausages (such as sun-dried tomato, honey & apple, Greek with feta and black olives), and more. The original store showcased selected food specialties from other Ontario producers, plus a small but interesting variety of tempting ready-to-serve meats, soups and casseroles.

Customers appreciate the approachable, helpful manner of the entire Farmgate staff, who share Sandy and Ray's dedication to food safety and great service. Consistent staffing has been a priority, as has staff development. Jeff Bain, who joined Farmgate in 2008 as an apprentice, is presently studying full-time to complete a five-month meat-cutting course, and is well on his way to obtaining both chef and meat-cutting certifications.

Sandy gives Ray high credit for Farmgate's success, noting "Farmgate wouldn't be possible without Ray." Their products and Ray's expertise are also valued by several local eateries who strive to include Ontario products on their menus.

The tiny original store was bursting with possibilities, but cramped for space. Opening this past October, the new location has allowed the staff at Farmgate to run with their creative ideas.

The quadrupled square footage is roomy and bright, and it offers customers a clear view of the glassed-in cold prep room. Long stretches of window on three sides of the storefront provide a sunny spot for patrons of the eat-in seating area. Lunch-time customers can select from the daily specials, soups and sandwiches. More ready-to-cook items provide tasty answers to the "what's for dinner?" dilemma. The most recent favourite is a chicken breast stuffed with asparagus, ham and Swiss cheese, all set to pop in the oven. For home-made taste and the ultimate in convenience, you can also pick up a growing selection of casseroles, soups, and desserts.

The Ontario-sourced lineup of complementary items has also grown to fill space in the new store. You will find seasonal vegetables, a wide selection of gluten-free baked goods, ice cream, cheeses, Lake Erie perch, condiments and sauces, and artisan breads baked in St. Thomas by CRUST Bakery.

The staff at Farmgate get excited about the seasons and holidays, offering food specialties to help celebrate the year's special days. There will be corned beef for St. Patrick's, and having received a tip that the Farmgate corned beef is exceptional, I have picked up



Butcher Ray Coddington

a piece for a St. Patrick's dinner of corned beef and cabbage (plus Ray's "secret" recipe for cooking it).

Farmgate's focus on the seasons makes them a great fit for the busy St. Thomas Horton Farmers Market. For the last two years, they have enjoyed providing a selection of fresh and deli favourites to the Saturday morning market. Sandy continues to put a face to the Farmgate "farm to fork" link — when things aren't too hectic on the farm, he helps serve up the popular market breakfast sandwich.

Farmgate has been successful in bringing something special to local customers — a source for meats of uncompromising quality, a dedication to featuring a complementary selection of the best that other Ontario producers have to offer, and an endless supply of menu inspiration.

**Farmgate Markets Deli & Fresh Meat**  
19 Elgin Street, St. Thomas  
519-637-0055  
[www.farmgatemarket.com](http://www.farmgatemarket.com)

**DEBRA BAGSHAW** is the editor of Relish Elgin ([www.relishelgin.ca](http://www.relishelgin.ca)).

Photographs are by **PHILIP J. BELL**, Shutter Studios, St. Thomas.