



Chef Michael Smith, official host of Fall Flavours.

FULL OF FLAVOURS

How does a major festival become an instant success? Could be that the stars are lined up or serendipity steps in. But, more likely than not, there's a lot of brains in the background and plain honest work. Whatever the mix, Fall Flavours (created and developed by Tourism Charlottetown) had its debut September 30th in 2008. For six days, off-island visitation spiked 40 per cent. Thousands of people—and thousands of dollars—poured into PEI. The draw? Over 130 culinary and cultural events judiciously spread across the island.

Shannon Pratt, Festivals and Events manager with Tourism Charlottetown says that tourism, fishing and agriculture sectors were interested from the moment Fall Flavours was announced. It didn't take long to get the marketing machine rolling. One thing that helped was to get Chef Michael Smith (Food Network TV's *Chef at Home*, *Chef at Large*, *Chef Abroad* and the *Inn Chef*) on board as the official host.

The second ingredient that molded the success of this venture was a series of authentic experiences with broad-based appeal. Folks could go tonging for oysters, learn how to hand dip chocolates or dig potatoes followed by dinner with field hands at the farm. "They could get their hands dirty as well as experience food from the source. But, ultimately, the success of Fall Flavours has to do with simply having a good product," Pratt says.

The entire experience took the Tourism Charlottetown staff a bit out of their comfort zone, but as a result of the festival, Pratt adds, "Both Islanders and CFAs (come-from-aways) had the opportunity to discover what PEI has to offer—the bounty of the land and the sea. There is a lot available here in our own backyards but for some reason many people aren't aware of what is here and where to find it!"

Chef Calvin Burt, owner/operator of Shipwright's Café in Margate, was over-the-moon happy with the festival. People signed up to take cooking classes focused on making breads, apple pies and flavoured oils and salts from herbs in his garden. "It turned the first of October

on the Island into July. It was just amazing. From a business point of view, knowing you have a group coming is more secure," says the culinary guru, "than hanging your shingle out then waiting to see what traffic comes your way. We would not have had that revenue without a program like that."

If there's a lesson to be learned about the success of Fall Flavours, Burt believes it's about finding a natural fit. "We are a million acre garden here in PEI. Why not celebrate potatoes?" He also sees that people are hungry for experiences that are not contrived. "They want an authentic experience in this un-authentic world. We provide them with a grass roots experience."

Ultimately, it's also about connection. For example, Burt hopes that if someone from Toronto takes part in Fall Flavours, the next time they see a bag of PEI potatoes in a supermarket back home, they might say, "Hey! I bet those are so and so's potatoes!"

Kevin Murphy concurs. He presides over the Murphy Group of Restaurants and chairs the Tourism Association of Charlottetown so he's well tuned into food trends and tourism research. Experiential tourism is hot. Culinary tourism is hot. "It was staring us right in the face. Our primary products are key. We're not going to build a ski hill here, but we can be world class when it comes to food. We've just scratched the surface. We can become a culinary mecca," Murphy says.

The next step is to educate the operators in PEI. Some don't get it. If you're slogging around a muddy potato field, or freezing your butt on a lobster boat, it's hard to picture what's so exotic about potatoes and lobsters. Or if you cater to tourists who sit on the beach all day or can't be lured off the golf course, it's tricky to fathom that there is a new breed of tourist out there. They are an inquisitive, curious lot. They love good food but it better be local. And they don't want to be spoon fed. They are also willing to pay what something is worth as long as it's the real thing. Throw in a celebrity like Chef Michael Smith and sittings for dinner at \$150 a plate are sold out before first frost.

Fall Flavours has expanded to 10 days this year (Sept. 25-Oct.4, fallflavours.ca) I've already booked my vacation—and signed up for sessions on shucking oysters and how to make seaweed pie. 