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Toronto's locavore Pan Am games

When athletes fuel up, it will be on Ontario's meat and potatoes, corn, fish from Lake Erie.



NATHAN DENETTE / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Peter Rick of Morningstar Hospitality Services Inc. displays food items which Pan Am and Parapan athletes will eat.

By: Paola Loriggio The Canadian Press, Published on Thu Jun 11 2015

TORONTO—When hungry baseball teams competing in this summer's Pan Am Games break for lunch at the ballpark, they'll be eating potatoes grown in a tiny hamlet in Norfolk County, corn plucked from fields near Lake Simcoe and wild fish pulled from the waters of Lake Erie.

Much of the food served to athletes and officials at the international event — whether at sports venues or the athletes' village — will come from the very province or country hosting the Games, say the companies tasked with fuelling thousands of elite competitors and their entourage.

“We deal with food service providers that source their food anyway from Canada and Ontario specifically, so there was a natural fit there when the Games came up and what they would like us to do,” said Chris Trainor, whose company, Morningstar Hospitality Services, is catering three major competition venues including the Ajax ballpark.

The company, which is based on the Chippewas of Rama First Nation, is also feeding police at the unified communications centre as well as Games staff and volunteers at the accreditation and uniform distribution centres.

Food at the athletes' village in downtown Toronto will be provided by Sodexo Canada, with meals and snacks available to incoming athletes as early as Canada Day — 10 days before the opening ceremony.

“We're trying to get as many Canadian (ingredients) as possible, and within that, as much from Ontario as possible,” said Stephen Lee, Sodexo's executive chef for the Games.

Most of the chicken and seafood, in particular, will be from Canada, he said.

Some athlete favourites, however, simply can't be sourced locally, he said.

"We do not have 90,000 bananas available grown in Canada," he said.

At the venues, meals will include fruits and vegetables grown across southern Ontario, trout farmed in St. Thomas, whitefish from Lake Erie and pork from the St. Jacobs area, Morningstar's suppliers said.

Tracing the exact provenance of beef, bison and chicken is trickier, however. Both Pixtar Canada, which is supplying poultry, and Sheridan Specialties, which provides the rest of the meat, say abattoirs don't tell them which farms they draw from, only the general region.

"It's not like going to the health food store, where you see the name of the farm on the label," said Steve Haid of Sheridan Specialties.

The bison comes from Quebec and Alberta, and the beef from southern Ontario, he said.

Pixtar's Bill Johnman said all the chicken it is providing for the Games — some 36,300 kilograms — is from Ontario. The venues contract has meant a 30 per cent boost in business for nine weeks, which he said has a "pretty significant" impact on the business's bottom line.

Focusing on local ingredients "where possible" was one of the requirements laid out by the Toronto 2015 organizing committee, a spokesman said.

Organizers said they couldn't determine exactly how much would be spent on food until the competitions are over, citing unpredictable changes in food prices and athlete appetites.

But they said some 464,000 meals are expected to be served during the Pan Am and Parapan Am Games, at an average cost of \$15 each, including equipment and labour expenses. That adds up to nearly \$7 million.

"Generally, we can say we are on budget," spokesman Kevin Dove said.

One thing is clear, the caterers said: when feeding 10,000 athletes and officials, the buffet is king.

And no matter where the athletes fuel up, they'll know exactly how much protein, fat and carbohydrates they're putting into their bodies, the companies said. Vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free options will also be available at all sites.

At the athletes' village, more than 400 cooks and kitchen staff will help prepare the meals, many from Toronto culinary schools, Lee said.

Five hot food stations named after Toronto neighbourhoods and landmarks will provide meals, each with a different specialty, he said. One will focus on superfoods, one on Asian flavours, one on classic meat, vegetable and starch combinations, one on Italian foods, and another on food truck-inspired dishes.

Though extremely health-conscious before their events, even the most serious athletes like to indulge in junk food from time to time, Lee said to explain the food truck element.

“When the athletes are finished competing and watching every mouthful that they eat and every calorie that they eat, they do tend to visit this type of food,” he said.

The village is also peppered with cafes and self-serve food stands where athletes can grab a snack to take on the road, he said.

Food for the venues will be prepared at Morningstar’s commercial kitchen in Mississauga, and shipped to each location, though at least one will have a portable kitchen on site, said executive chef Peter Rick.

There, the meals will focus on “subtle flavours” that take into account athletes’ varying taste preferences as well as their nutritional needs, Rick said. There will also be an emphasis on traditional aboriginal dishes and flavours, he said.

The menu will rotate on a six-day cycle so athletes shouldn’t face the same meal more than twice, he said.

“We’re just adding flair to common staple foods and we do that through presentation and a few ingredients.”