

BVI

Meet and Eat in the Comox Valley

If you think that meetings necessarily involve catered lunches or dinners of rubber chicken, then you haven't had your meetings in the Comox Valley!

That's the opinion of people who cater meetings and weddings in the valley and who are passionate about using its bountiful local produce and culinary products. In fact, the Comox Valley is rapidly becoming known as the quintessential meeting place for people who love good, local cuisine and for those who embrace the "100 mile diet."

In 2008 Mount Washington Alpine Resort decided to pay the ultimate tribute to local cuisine by holding its first Alpine Food Festival. Brent Curtain, public relations director for the resort, says it was such a success that this year it's going to be even bigger and better with a larger roster of celebrity chefs from the valley, around BC and across Canada. Star chefs include Eric Akis who writes a food column for the Victoria Times Colonist and Corbin Tomaszewski of Food Network fame.

This year the Alpine Food Festival takes place September 4 – 6. "Let's celebrate the Comox Valley and all it has to offer," Curtain says. "We have a fantastic agri-business in the valley. Between the Comox Valley and the Cowichan Valley, I think we're two of the leading areas as far as good, organic produce and eating local."

Many people come to the festival for the entire weekend, Curtain says. Packages are outlined on the resort's web site at www.mountwashington.ca/foodfestival and include cooking classes and exceptional tasting experiences. "It's literally mind boggling what you can get in the valley," Curtain says. "There's bison and poultry and the best part is that we're buying local and we know what these products are about. We talk to the people who are producing the products."

The Alpine Food Festival isn't the only occasion for which Mount Washington Alpine Resort draws on the bounty of the Comox Valley. Curtain points out that corporate meetings take place at the resort and it is also becoming known as the wedding capital of Vancouver Island. Catered occasions present menus leaning heavily on local producers and growers.

"We encourage a local menu for all those events," Curtain says. "And people support the emphasis on local. I think people have a heightened awareness of where the food is coming from. It's part of the 100 mile diet that everyone is talking about these days. Why get Atlantic salmon if you can get fresh BC salmon? I think people appreciate that we're trying to get things from local farmers and suppliers."

Randy Rai, accommodations manager of Crown Isle Resort and Golf Community says that his staff too, works hard to produce menus using local products. The resort is well known as a meeting place and a spectacular venue for weddings. "The 100 mile diet

seems to be what people are looking for,” he says. “They’re trying to experience the cuisine of the area.”

He notes that the Comox Valley supplies an abundant variety of fresh produce as well as meats and value added farm products. The resort purchases local free range chicken, locally caught fish and vegetables and fruits from local farms.

Rai says the chef likes to vary his menus and make them interesting and delectable for the clients holding meetings at the resort. “They have the opportunity to come in and try something different and new based on what’s fresh right at the moment.”

The Best Western The Westerly Hotel in Courtenay stages more than 1,000 meetings and weddings each year. In addition, banquet and conference manager Andrea Wagemaker points out that the hotel also handles off-site catering. Whether on or off the premises, Wagemaker says she uses local produce as much as possible. “It’s fresher and we’re supporting our local farmers. There’s also the economic impact. And most people, when they’re travelling, want to taste the Comox Valley. They’re looking for that local flavour experience and we have an abundance of it.”

She says that the chefs in the Comox Valley are very fortunate. They’re surrounded by award-winning products such as Natural Pastures Cheeses, the freshest seafood and even a local tilapia farm. The Westerly obtains bread from Grains, that uses organic grains. “There are a lot of advantages to using local products – it gives us a unique niche in the meeting and catering market,” Wagemaker says.

Rubber chicken is definitely not on the menu at The Westerly. Wagemaker says that she often has to work within budget constraints but she still looks at each menu with an eye to local and fresh ingredients. What’s fresh right now is a top of mind concern. She adds that local wineries also contribute greatly to the “eat fresh and local” experience. “People coming from out of town want that whole experience,” she says. “When they leave they can say they had the best prawns or the best salmon and they had that whole West Coast experience. We certainly try to deliver that to our guests.”