

'Buy local' cafe set to open in former Real Food Connections location

Locavore Foods will cater to the restaurant crowd instead of grocery shoppers

By Matthew Bingley, [CBC News](#) Posted: Jan 22, 2017



Locavore Foods has hired back many staff members from Real Food Connections, though the new business will require different training. (Matthew Bingley/CBC)

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Two New Brunswick entrepreneurs are hoping they can take an unsuccessful local grocery in a more profitable direction as a local food cafe.

The plastic once covering the windows of the former Real Food Connections location in Saint John has been removed and on Monday, several workers will drive down from Fredericton to take over the store.

It's now called "Locavore Foods."

"We're all hands on deck," said Jason Lejeune, one of the co-owners of Locavore. "The appearance has changed from being a grocery application to a cafe application."

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Lejeune said the Saint John cafe should be ready to open by mid-week, once it passes health inspections.

After Real Food Connections closed because of financial problems, Lejeune, who owns Isaac's Way restaurant in Fredericton, and Sean Dunbar, owner of Picaroons Traditional Ales, decided to adapt the company.

'When people come in, they're going to know that they're eating New Brunswick-produced farm foods, as much as we can possibly make it.' - *Jason Lejeune*

The pair picked up the Real Food assets and have re-branded the "buy local" format to produce food for cafes in Fredericton and Saint John. The company will still buy New Brunswick-produced food, but using its commercial kitchen and cafes, it's catering to the restaurant crowd instead of grocery shoppers.

"When people come in, they're going to know that they're eating New Brunswick-produced farm foods, as much as we can possibly make it," Lejeune said.



Locavore Foods is aiming to open mid-week in the Saint John building formerly occupied by Real Food Connections. (Matthew Bingley/CBC)

The cafe venture has been selling food for two weeks at the Picaroons Roundhouse in Fredericton. Dunbar said the food is well received, but those looking for poutine and chicken wings will have to go elsewhere.

"We certainly have our share of people coming in and saying, you know, 'where's the unhealthy food?'" Dunbar said.

"That's not really what Locavore intends to do ever, so product differentiation, I think, is looking after itself."

Healthy pub-themed menu

Lejeune and Dunbar have designed the menus to please those enjoying a beer. The offerings include hot sandwiches with locally-baked bread, curries and soups, even locally-sourced sausages for bangers and mash. It's like any other pub, but with one difference from other locations, Lejeune said.

"You're going to be able to come in and have a hot, pub-inspired, New Brunswick-produced meal," he said.

A lot of the menu Lejeune said was inspired by what the local producers had after Real Food Connections closed.

"This has given us an opportunity to reach out and say, 'Hey, bring your stuff to us, we'll buy it.'"

Staff kept on

While Locavore has retained a lot of the Real Food Connections food producers, Lejeune said it has also kept most of its staff. Between both locations, 12 employees were kept on and another two were hired in Saint John.

Dunbar admits the venture has put the pair out on a limb from a business standpoint, but he said it's worth the risk.

"The prospect of bringing local food to New Brunswickers is the exciting part."

On Sunday afternoon, new manager Robin Ross and one of her employees were getting a head start on the busy week. "It's going to be a pretty hectic next couple of days," she said.

Though the company has hired back many staff members from Real Food Connection, Ross said the new business will require different training.

'Brand new business'

"This is a brand new business, it's a completely different thing," she said.

Staff will need training on several pieces of equipment, such as the new espresso maker.

As busy as she is, Ross said she doesn't mind taking a few moments to speak with people peeking in through the windows.

"People are curious," she said. "I think it's good, people are engaged."