

[A Foodie's Dream: The Company Leading New Brunswick's Real Food Movement](#)

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by [Cherise Letson](#)



FREDERICTON– Levi Lawrence had been working in the food and beverage industry for over eight years. After working as a bartender, kitchen manager and chef, he decided he wanted to be his own boss.

“I went back to school and did a business degree at UNB,” Lawrence says. “I wanted to open a restaurant, but then figured out I wasn’t ready to open a restaurant knowing more about business.”

So he decided to take a different approach. In 2010, [Real Food Connections](#) was first introduced as a delivery service, delivering fresh foods from local farmers right to your door.

“We started a home delivery business out of our shed and were licensed as a warehouse,” Lawrence says. “Essentially it was farm market-style grocery delivered through the week to your home and office.”

This went really well for the first summer, but after getting feedback from customers they realized there was a bigger need, needs Lawrence and his team could easily fulfill.

By 2012, Real Food Connections had opened its first store/kitchen/warehouse in Fredericton. Just before Christmas, they opened a second retail location in Saint John.

“We’ve been looking at this for a long time,” Lawrence says. “We did a year of research and stakeholder interviews and then we did three months of raising money and selling shares.”

It was a smart move for many reasons. The obvious one being that having Saint John as a depot improves distribution to nearby communities like St. Andrews, Sussex and Hampton. But the other reason was Saint John's attitude towards food.

"You get the most collaborative and advanced food culture, from a business-to-business point of view, than anywhere we've seen in New Brunswick," Lawrence says. "We go and talk to chefs and different food businesses and everybody's more talkative and collaborative...way more than we've seen in other cities."

Over the past several years there's been a growing local food movement. Lawrence says it's driven by a couple different factors.

"The generation that's now in their 20's and 30's has access to how things are made and where things come from. When you start asking those questions with food, a lot of the answers you eventually get to are not the ones you want to hear," he says.

"Some people are economically driven and they just want to see a better region and a better province. The idea that if you want to live in a province that makes things, you better buy the things they make."

But is the local food movement just a trend that will fade away? Lawrence doesn't think so. In fact, he thinks it's just beginning in New Brunswick.

"If you look at it like the tech industry, we have the loyal early adopters that we're hoping will get us to a point where we have enough volume of business in place and partners in the industry that we become more integrated."

At the end of the day, the goal of Real Food Connections is to make local food in the region more accessible to those who want to eat it.

"But in order to do that we had to create our own distribution company, we had to create a food packing and processing company," Lawrence says. "We've had to create retail stores that we can trust and own and control. So we can tell the story . . . and be true to ourselves."

In the future, Lawrence sees Real Food Connection opening more retail stores. He also sees more opportunities in food processing, working with farmers to create products that they can sell in bigger super markets.



Levi Lawrence, Owner Real Food Connections



Real Food Connections, 34 Canterbury Street Saint John

“I see us as splitting up a bit. Right now we have one big do-everything company,” Lawrence says. “I’d like to see in three or four years, that we actually have two or three separate companies with similar cultures and really close ties, but are concentrating on their own goals.”

Though the company may go through some changes, one thing Lawrence says will remain constant is having a triple bottom line: financial, social and environmental. Though the company is a straight for-profit business with around 190 invested stakeholders, its impact on its environment and society is just as important.

“I’d like Real Food Connections to be an example of that change, the shift in attitude. I’ve talked to a lot of businesses who are also doing those same things. It’s a really important thing to recognize the idea of impact investment,” Lawrence says.

“The quickest path to fixing some of our social, economic ills as a province is to create consciously minded for-profit private business. A group of business owners who give a crap can make more positive change than any kind of government policy or any other group, really. ”