

97th Royal Agricultural Winter Fair underway at CNE grounds

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The 97th Royal Agricultural Winter Fair is very big, heavy with history of the celebrities that have ridden and entertained thousands of people over the near century in the Coliseum; the biggest pumpkins of every year who would believe them?

The finest cows, sheep, goats, chickens all that the farm will bring will compete here for ribbons and boasting rights, for the business and prestige of farming.

Then, there are the horses and very fine they are, coming from every sort of discipline, from the smallest equine to the mighty draft horses, all immaculately groomed, elegant and brave.

Luckily, the big media are all over it. So, we can visit smaller comers here and have some fun, learn a little about the interesting small enterprises people think to bring to this Grand Old Lady of a festival. We took a stroll through the Northern Ontario aisles.

Deke Zaher, born and raised in Sudbury, has brought, for five days only of the ten days that are the Royal's run, his business, Zaher's Small Batch. How many kinds of Hummus can you count? Meet Deke and taste 13 different versions of the great classic dish.

At its most fundamental and basic, hummus is chick peas, lemon, garlic, parsley, salt and tahini blended well in a machine and served, with a whirl of best olive oil, on a table with other dishes of hors d'ouvres or mesa, as the Mediterranean people who love it call it.

It's nice as a snack on its own, with a little warm pitta bread too.

Mr. Zaher declares unblushingly, "This is the best hummus in the market."

Like so many people, his business life descends from his roots: his Palestinian family, some of whom were fine chefs.

"My first show and tell at school, in 1984, was a dish of hummus," he related seriously. "When I first went into the food business, I started a fine dining pre-prepared dishes. But it didn't take. So, in 2016, I made my own line of hummus, which I sell in small containers to go. It's vegan, portable, fresh. We make a hummus bowl with a small salad on the top.

"There are a couple of babaganoush flavours too."

He also makes soup, no doubt very welcome in the winters there.

He has a shop in Sudbury where he produces and sells his many small batches, with considerable success.

This is Mr. Zaher's first time at the Royal but he is reckoning on coming back. Meanwhile, it has been a good and educational time for him a "how to do the Royal" time for him.

"Next year," said he, "I'll use the kitchen, which I didn't know was there and I'll do demos."

He could become a regular.

Kevin Parchment was our next port of call with his Bee Bags.

"These are cotton with beeswax coating," he explained, spreading one out for us to see and gesturing to us to feel the waxy surface.

'We waste far too much food by the way we store it,' he admonished. 'these bags keep things fresher longer and don't use plastic.'

Holding up the largest of his bags, 'This is perfect for salad. You just put it in here and it stays fresh much longer than in those plastic boxes the salad comes in. Then, you rinse the bag with cool water and (demonstrating) stand it up side down to dry. Using hot water will deplete the wax and you should not scrub it either, for the same reason. They are good to last a year.'

These are designed to replace the ziplock plastic bags in your cupboards. There are sheets for wrapping food, like cheese, on the market as well, and he praised those too.

'Just wrap your food in them,' he instructed, 'and they don't need anything else.'

Based in Huntsville, the Bees Bags were the idea of his partner and 'I joined forces with her. I have the business background and she had the good idea. She was trying to get rid of the plastic in her life.'

He showed us the paper bags they use to send the Bees bags home.

'Even they have a film of wax on them,' he said, 'so they don't tear so easily while you're taking them with you.'

Moving on, we met Morgan House, who has such a remarkable display of art made from wool. This in itself is not unique but her pictures are different. They are like paintings, but woolly and she has had made coasters, table place mats and material with their images that are lovely.

She admitted to a childhood eccentricity about sheep.

'This started because I have had a fixation with sheep since I was a child. For my tenth birthday, I asked my parents for a lamb and so, they gave me a Barbie doll. After some consternation, I made her a farmer Barbie and then, she was cool.

'I grew up on a farm where we had pigs and cattle. My father was a pragmatic farmer and he thought there wasn't much money in sheep.

'Now, I live back in the country ' on a rural property,' as she put it, so as not to be calling herself a farmer. She raises and shears her own sheep and dyes the wool herself for her art.

'I have not taken any courses,' she confirmed, with a touch of disdain for the idea. 'I'm learning by doing.'

Hers is art from farm to frame; it's free range art.

Finally, for our mini tour, we stopped at the North Ontario Agricultural Food Education and Marketing.

Sharon Lane and Pat Marcotte work with people local to them, artisans to bring a range of fabric and other goods: small clothing for youngsters. There are large squares of felt, for which they are plenty of uses both artistically and practically; knitting, hand work of many kinds, wooden toys, and woolen little animals; there is handmade soap and knick-knacks; lots of preserves; a basket holds polished Lake Superior Stones. It is a treasure trove of unexpected items.

Said Ms.Marcotte, 'We bring the work our members do here to the Royal and charge a handling fee. Everyone benefits.'

The Royal Agricultural Winter Fair is on at the Enercare Centre in Exhibition Place, Toronto until this Sunday evening, November 10. Lots of chance to take a train or bus if you don't fancy the drive.

Check it out at royalfair.org