

Royal Agricultural Winter Fair opens this weekend

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

'Get Agricultured?' is the advice from this year's Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, opening Friday, Nov. 2 and running for 10 full days until Sunday, Nov. 11.

The Royal brags, quite rightly, that it brings the country to the city. For those of us living here in a town setting within a rural area, there is also lots to enjoy about the fair. Lots that make the trip to visit it well worthwhile.

This is the Royal's, the Grand Old Lady's 96th birthday. There is a collection of photos going pretty well all the way back, lining a wall just off Heritage Court, to prove the longevity of this esteemed annual celebration of what goes on in the green spaces. Farmers bring their animals, vegetables, wonderful and strange, and their bright new ideas on how to farm better in the future.

'Honestly, it's pretty special. I've done a whole bunch of high-powered events, like the Honda Indy, but I've never seen an event as big and special as this,' said Charlie Johnstone, CEO of the Royal, now in his fourth year in the job.

As though still under the spell of his first impressions, Mr. Johnstone went on to say, 'People come here for generations. It's wholesome, real, authentic. People come in and breathe deeply; they breathe in the farm and the animals' they say, 'Ah, that's the Royal.'

He had high praise for the participants.

'The pride and passion people here have for what they bring to the Royal. People work all year to prepare for this and we need to be on that thought and say, 'This is what the Royal is. It is the largest indoor agricultural fair in the world'.'

He told us, 'We're dealing with a million square feet of space. And it's also the biggest indoor international horse show in North America.'

Mr. Johnstone is right on all counts. People have been coming to the Royal for generations, with their cattle and cows. In the Coliseum, they present their fine horses and the ponies their children ride; they bring their fabulous carriages and equally glamorous heavy horses to pull them, groomed to gleaming, high-stepping, a sight not often seen anywhere else on this side of the Atlantic. The thrill of the show jumping horses flying over walls and tall gates, the many other equine competitions that one would hope for in a celebration of this calibre, are all part of what is going on in the Coliseum.

Additionally, the Ontario Toyota Dealers Rodeo takes place on Sunday, Nov. 11.

Some shows require tickets, others are included in the price of admission.

Exciting for fans, too, to learn that Amber Marshall of Heartland is coming back to the Royal, as well, on Saturday, Nov. 10 and Sunday, Nov. 11, to meet visitors to the Royal and give autographs.

Others farmers transport their rabbits, and birds of so many breeds. Sheep, too, and goats hang about in pens and flirt with visitors, baaa-ing and looking for tidbits. Llamas, for the last several years, have been another attraction to the world of farm animals taking time out in the city.

In the cattle barn, the hay, the straw, the grooming and cleaning. The pride of good husbandry. The fascination of walking through a farm, this is all brought to town for just these 10 days.

'Part of what we see as our job is to present the farm to table story 'how does the food come to the table?' Mr. Johnstone explained. 'We become that authentic voice with school groups and for more than one generation. Some new Canadians can come and see all aspects of what is Canada under one roof. We are world renown for what we're doing.'

With the main thrust of the show focussed on agriculture, the Royal's partnership with the University of Guelph makes sense. The university has an interesting exhibition at the Royal that relates to much of interest there.

'There are First Nations chefs here participating in the culinary academy that has been such a favourite taking traditional menus with a modern twist on them,' said Johnstone.

Food is a huge part of the Royal with, not only the animals and the chefs but the farmers who come to with real explanations about growing food, the importance of the green belt and the issues around GMO's.

'I think that one of the advantages is that people can talk to the producers, specifically about GMO 'what is it? Free range, organic. 'We're not taking a position. Come and learn and decide for yourself. When you can actually talk to a farmer, it gives you a better understanding. Ask the questions and be answered by coming to the Royal,' said Mr. Johnstone.

Speaking of eating, a person could fill up over and over with the number of eateries set up at the Royal, enough to please every taste and wallet, from the food court down in Hall D to the other establishments all around the Royal, looking so beautiful, they appear to be fixtures, not only there for the 10 days.

There is, not surprisingly, a very large market place for shopping with a tremendously broad variety of shops, while still keeping to

the nature of the show. It is real pleasure to browse and buy from the very many vendors who have, like everyone else, worked long and hard to prepare for these wonderful 10 days.

Everything for the equine and equestrian is to be found, as one would expect but there is so much more as well. Many merchants have stock that requires storytelling and explanation, all part of the great experience the Royal promises. Each will offer items of good quality, yet, in this too, every budget will find something of beauty or interest to take home.

Down in Hall D is the fabulous President's Choice Animal Theatre, wherein an astonishing variety of clever doing their things amazes and amuses audiences every day. From the dogs herding, Medieval Times, a horse whisperer, and, most famously, The Super Dogs. All the entertainment in the Animal Theatre is free with admission.

Although the towns in this whole region are surrounded by farms, there is still much to learn at the Royal for the many of us who do not stray far from our somewhat urban lives. Once visited, the desire to return is strong, so extraordinary is this very traditional, yet always up to date Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, on at Exhibition Place at the western end of central Toronto.

?We would focus on how special the Royal is to share time with the family. The GO train drops people off right at the back of the building. It's the perfect way to come and GO does special rate tickets to include the price of admission,? said Johnstone.

For all the details, the website is www.royalfair.org