

Taste of Tourism awards presented at Dufferin County Museum

By Tabitha Wells

The Caledon Agricultural Society was among the recipients honoured recently by the Hills of Headwaters Tourism Association. The Association celebrated excellence in tourism and hospitality at their annual tourism awards ceremony. The Agricultural Society was recognized for its annual Snowfest, which has been held the last two Family Days in February. It was named the Tourism Event or Festival of the Year.

The area doesn't boast beaches, cityscapes or large attractions that people typically think of when someone mentions tourism. But the communities that are a part of the Hills of Headwaters offer much of their own unique options for visitors to the area.

"We have people throughout the year who have visited or locals who live in the area and have had the best visitor experience when they come up, they do their thing, and this is when we give out our awards," explained Tourism Association Executive Director Michele Harris. "We had almost a hundred nominations this year. We narrowed them down and then basically what we do is we pull them all together into finalists."

Once the finalists had been determined, they were sent off to the Ministry of Tourism where a final decision was made. The results were sent back only days before the event, and only Harris knew the results.

"Tourism is a huge economic driver for this community," Harris observed. "What we know about people who visit this area is that they often become the people who live here in the future, or choose to set up businesses here, or just tell their friends. They leave money in our community."

She added that most of the operators in the area are small business owners who love the area, as does the Tourism Association. That was why they wanted to do something to promote and celebrate them.

The event started with dinner, drinks and socializing inside the museum. Orangeville's new Barley Vine Rail (BVR) restaurant provided one of the food stations for guests of the event.

"Being a new restaurant you want to get as much exposure as you can and also it's a community event," said Ryan Latore, co-owner of BVR. "Any time you can be involved with the community in any way, it's important."

According to Harris, the awards were first held at the museum three years ago, but after that, they knew it was the best place to host them.

"It's magical, it's the perfect spot," she said. "We used to have it in different locations, but the museum is a huge partner of ours. The first year we ever had it here it was completely magical. We all knew there was nowhere else we could go, this was the spot."

The award categories were all tourism oriented and ranged from Best Arts, Culture or Heritage to Artisan of the Year, Best New Tourism Business and more.

The importance of tourism to keeping local towns alive and flourishing is a message that is still being spread, according to Harris, and is part of the reason behind both the Tourism Association and the Awards.

"It's important for the businesses to be recognized, as local residents of this community," she explained. "Tourism supports their community values, and they need to help be ambassadors for people who come here. People who love this region and come and visit it like it because we get to meet the people. It's the 'Cheers' factor as I like to call it, so it's just really important. We try to keep our tourism about who we are as a community."

The judges from the Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Culture were highly impressed with the calibre of nominees and finalists, and ultimately chose the following winners in each category:

- ? Best Arts, Culture or Heritage Experience ? Cuisine-Art (Alton Mill).
- ? Artisan of the Year ? Silver Creek Arts.
- ? Best Agri-Tourism Experience ? Dufferin Farm Tour.
- ? Tourism Event or Festival of the Year ? Snowfest Caledon.
- ? Best Culinary Tourism Experience ? Mono Cliffs Inn.
- ? Best Overnight Getaway Experience ? Cadogan Farm Adventures Bed and Breakfast.
- ? Best Customer Service Experience (Business) ??Rosemont General Store.
- ? Best Customer Service Experience (Individual)?? Heather Burke (Off Broadway Boutique).
- ? Best New Tourism Business ? Sproule's Emporium.
- ? Tourism Innovator ? Angelstone Tournaments.
- ? Tourism Ambassador ? Wayne Townsend.
- ? Chairperson's Award of Merit ? Annette Turturici (Inglewood Antique Market).

Nominations are now open for next year's Taste of Tourism awards, and submissions can be made until October 2014. Take this opportunity to recognize the 'best of the best' in the Headwaters tourism industry by nominating a favourite business or operator. Nominations can be made online at www.thehillsofheadwaters.com