

RIVER CAFE

A river literally ran through this restaurant

Sal Howell was looking forward to the 10th anniversary of her restaurant, Calgary's River Cafe. The spring of 2005 had been sunny and warm, generating more patio business than normal. Her suppliers' gardens were growing well and the summer was shaping up to be a strong one for the Prince's Island restaurant.

What Howell didn't expect was to be knee deep in the Bow River as it flowed through her wine cellar on the eve of the anniversary. Or to have her restaurant shut down for two of her most profitable summer weeks. River Cafe had become one of the victims of the Flood of 2005 in Calgary, an event that saw both the Bow and Elbow Rivers wreak havoc on the lives and businesses of countless Calgarians.

As floods do, it happened quickly. Rains that had deposited over 200 millimetres of water on the Alberta Foothills were unrelenting and the Bow River rose quickly, finding its own way across the island. In minutes, River Cafe's 4,500-bottle wine cellar began filling with murky river water and the staff closed the place down. River Cafe was left to the whims of Mother Nature. Watching from the mainland, Howell hoped for the best.

River Cafe is the only real building on Prince's Island. In the early 1990s, it was developed into one of Calgary's top restaurants. With 85 seats in a lodge-like setting and another 80 on a sunwashed patio, it is a literal oasis in downtown Calgary.

Howell is committed to a local, seasonal and natural approach to food and wine. She showcases Western Canadian growers and processors as much as possible, changes the menu frequently, and has created a restaurant that is regionally unique. It's a haven for organic and small-production farmers, a place that carries their wild boar and organic turkeys and handpicked nettles. Over time, more producers have come on line, some have fallen away, and others haven't kept up with the production

demands of a large restaurant.

"It's an evolution; it's a journey," says Howell. "It started when we started and every year, we either deepen a relationship with one of the growers or start a new one. They are very much partners."

Howell's commitment to natural production methods has increased over the years, just as the industry itself has. It is not only a matter of quality and taste that motivates her to use organic ingredients but "it is also a very conscious decision to support those who are farming with integrity to the land and to their own environment."

For Howell, venues such as the Calgary Farmers' Market are a great way to support small local producers. She also relies on producers such as Vital Green Farms in Picture Butte and Sunworks Farm in Armenia to supply her with high-quality poultry, pork, beef, and dairy products.

"It's important to honor the difficulties of being a small farmer and a small grower, changing the tide of big agriculture and doing things organically and naturally," she says.

For instance, River Cafe has what Howell describes as a "very important

relationship" with Tony and Penny Marshall of Highwood Crossing Farm (www.highwoodcrossing.com) south of Calgary. It's a family-owned farm that specializes in organic grains, oils, cereals, and mixes. The Marshalls have planted a large vegetable garden exclusively for the cafe and the family. Each summer, a member of Howell's staff works in the garden and learns about organic growing.

"The Garden Project evolved from wanting to bring fresh, local produce from the garden to the table in the same day," says Howell.

The wine cellar, too, reflects her values. More than 10 per cent of her enviable 500-label cellar consists of organic and/or biodynamic wines. And the list is constantly changing as she searches out new wineries. She doesn't even carry Fetzer's admirable biodynamic Bonterra line anymore, because it's become so well known and, dare we say, mainstream.

Regarding streams, River Cafe is back to normal now, with few visible signs of the flood. Perhaps Mother Nature, cognizant of Howell's diligence to the natural way of things, recognized River Cafe as one of her own and took extra care to be gentle. - J.G.

[WITH A FILE FROM ANTHONY CHARRON]

The partners are committed to a local, seasonal, natural approach to food and wine.

