From Source to Shelf: Actualizing PEI's Food Island Capacity

Parry Aftab on the PEI Food Pulse Survey, food insecurity, trade barriers and a cookbook that is funding good work.

Parry Aftab

PEI Food Strong

Adapted from an interview with Parry Aftab of PEI Food Strong by Bianca McGregor, CEO of the Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce, at Speakers Corner at Confederation Court Mall on October 21, 2026.

What is PEI Food Strong and what are you building?

We're a business with a social purpose with the ultimate goal of "source to shelf". We have various brands which many will know including our Facebook Group PEI Good Eats, PEI Cooks at Home Cookbook, and Canadian Source to Supper Network.

Our approach is multi-pronged. We are helping to incubate food businesses. We're identifying gaps and barriers in food supply chains. We are tackling food waste. We are engaging with community on everything from food needs to food wants to food insecurity. For example. we are working with Second Harvest and Gifts from the Heart on rescued food that can be turned into good food, starting with specialized cat treats and eventually healthier treats for kids involved in athletics. We call it putting waste to work. If one quart in a pallet of blueberries has some mold on it, a retailer will throw out the whole pallet, but they don't have to. We can rescue the berries that are untainted and turn them into something nutritious and consumable.

The bigger vision is a co-packing facility, hopefully in Borden, where Islanders who grow or produce value added food products can make them shelf stable and get them into stores here and across Canada. We are also hoping to build a PEI Food Hub, a market for Island food. Our goal is to create the infrastructure and bridge gaps to help people get their harvests and food products to market, while also helping Islanders cook more, eat better on a budget, and get through these challenging days.

What brought you into this work?

After the recent U.S. election, I came out of retirement (former lawyer from New Jersey and Islander by choice) to do what I could to help Islanders withstand what I knew was coming (economic pressures). The way I would decompress after a long day would be to cook. I love to cook. When I retired to PEI I turned my passion into what is now PEI's largest food group on Facebook, with 23,000 members. It's called PEI Good Eats. Islanders share recipes, producers share deals, members upload sales flyers etc... It's been a great launching pad for all the other branches to the business; like supporting food businesses (incubation) and creating easier more affordable access to local food for Islanders. We needed funding for what we wanted to do. I called the mayor and the premier, and was told that my ideas were great, but there wasn't any funding available. So I went to our PEI Good Eats members, and they said, "Let's write a cookbook."

Tell us about the cookbook.

It is called *PEI Cooks at Home*: 79 home cooks, 150 Island recipes, 200 pages, all colour and spiral bound. The first few copies arrived in February and were gone in eight hours. Our first print order was for a thousand, and it continues to sell, with orders coming from Islanders and from people across the country. Walking down the street, I am now "the cookbook lady." All of it funds what we are trying to do which is bridge gaps in processing, logistics, create shared infrastructure and ultimately help get island food on as many tables as possible (across Canada and here on PEI) all while reducing food insecurity here at home.

You recently launched a massive food survey, what did the PEI Food Pulse Survey find?

We just closed the survey, and about 900 Islanders answered. Their biggest problem was the price of food, and it magnifies the more rural the respondents were. Some of the written comments broke my heart. Many respondents told us they are going without meals, that they have given up poultry and meat, and that they do not know where to shop. A lot of the issues stem not just from food costs, but fuel costs as well.

Islanders also told us about trust. When we asked whether some grocers are more trustworthy than others, most said yes. The most trusted grocer in the survey was Summerside Butcher's Shop, followed by Sobeys, with Loblaws well back. Many complained about labelling, and the lack of simple ways to show whether a product is Canadian or not. It is about supporting ourselves and making us economically stronger as a country.

We will be hosting an event soon to share the results with policy makers and others with expertise and an ability to offer meaningful insight. The headline is that on PEI - "Canada's Food Island", too many people are hungry, too many cannot get to markets, and too many do not trust the markets when they get there. 1 in 4 islanders is food insecure and we need to change that.

What about interprovincial trade barriers?

I am a lawyer underneath all of this, and I am working on making it easier for Islanders to sell their products across the Confederation Bridge. Last week I spoke at a summit in Toronto and moderated a panel on interprovincial trade barriers, with a representative of the Canadian Chamber on it. We have people with experience in government and in food law helping us, and I will keep pulling them together. If you understand these issues, get in touch. I am very good at using free expert labour, and Islanders (producers and consumers) need us to figure this all out and fast.

Is there anything else you would like people to know?

We talk a lot about "elbows up." I think we need to link elbows a lot more. On this Island, you do it better than any place I have been in the world (and I've been a lot of places), and I believe we can solve this problem together. The Chamber is recognized across Canada as one of the top chambers, and I am honoured to be a member through PEI Food Strong.

LEARN MORE

- Buy the cookbook: peicooks.com
- PEI Food Strong: peifoodstrong.com
- Source to Supper: sourcetosupper.com
- Parry Aftab: aftab.com
- LinkedIn: parryaftab
- PEI Good Eats on Facebook

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