

## **Oh, Canada!**

*By Kurt Lawton*

Embarking on my second pilgrimage to an International Federation of Agricultural Journalists (IFAJ) meeting was exciting for me in several ways. It was a wonderful opportunity to reconnect with many global agricultural journalists I had met in Japan during the IFAJ 2007 Congress. And second, I was excited to experience agriculture in Canada, while comparing notes with new agricultural communicators and old friends among our large global contingent.

The Canadian province of Ontario was home for our six-day stay during IFAJ 2011. (For the geographically-challenged, Ontario is stacked on top of the U.S. states from Minnesota to New York.) The fun and educational road trip portion of this Congress crisscrossed the highly productive farm country of southeast Ontario - the land surrounded by three Great Lakes. A few big picture things I found of interest during Congress were how dependent Canada is on exports (fifth largest in the world), and yet it is the sixth largest importer as well. They have a rigorous food safety system, a strong commitment to research and sustainable farm practices, and are major contributors to the World Food Program and countries in need of dire help such as the Horn of Africa. See Congress coverage here: <http://www.ifaj2011.com/en/coverage>

Following an excellent afternoon of “Canada 101” sessions, we hit the road headed west from Guelph to Lake Huron. As a member of the self-proclaimed “fun bus,” our tour thoroughly enjoyed visits to beef, swine and dairy family farms, a renowned apple farm, a huge farmers market (one of 158 in Ontario), a leading hog confinement contractor, a large farmer-owned co-operative that specialized in processing edible beans, and a popular vineyard in the heart of the Niagara wine country.

Some perspective on the grain side - Ontario has 28,000 grain farmers (average age is 52 yrs old) who grow an annual corn crop of 5.5 million tons, 2.3 million tons of soybeans and 1.5 million tons of wheat on 3.7 million crop acres. Most of the corn stays home for feed, ethanol, food additives and a Canadian favorite - rye whiskey. Soybean acres have grown eight-fold in the past 30 years. Its food-grade soys are sought after on the world market for their quality. And half the wheat crop (four classes) is used in domestic mills.

Ontario's dairy industry ranks third in terms of value behind grains and red meat. A typical dairy has 72 cows, which are managed closely to produce only enough milk to meet the farm's monthly quota, which keeps prices steady and dairy farmers in business without the volatility. They like that.

There are 19,000 beef farms in Ontario, approximately 330,000 beef cows, and many reside on small- to medium-sized farms that average 122 head. Angus, Hereford, Charolais and Simmental are the popular breeds, selected to produce well-marbled, tender and flavorful meat. Canada has a mandatory National Cattle Identification System, animal disease prevention practices and surveillance programs to ensure hazards are minimized and can be quickly and easily traced.

Our last tour stop was in the largest wine-producing region of Ontario, not far from the infamous Niagara Falls. We came, we tasted, we dined, we sampled (did I mention that), and we learned about the region's most sought-after export - Canadian ice wine. Yes, these grapes hang on the vine until a hard freeze occurs (17 degrees F), then they are harvested and turned into a delicacy wine craved by China, South Korea and the United States. We also learned the amazing flavor difference between a small and large ice wine glass (larger is better).

<http://www.winesofcanada.com/icewine3.html>

All in all, this trip reaffirmed one of the true joys of life in our small world of farm writing - traveling and working with friendly, fun and down-to-earth folks. I must say, eh, that such fun and passion exists north of the border as well. Everyone we encountered, talked to, interviewed, and joked with were all gracious and marvelous. I thought U.S. hospitality was awesome, but with the Canadians, I swear it's a national pastime, eh! And they like to party with life-size cardboard cutouts of famous Canadian sports figures and musicians (or perhaps that was for our amusement). Needless to say, good times were had by all.

I express one final note of thanks to the AAEA Professional Improvement Foundation for the stipend award. It allowed me to increase my awareness of our global agricultural stage, where we all live and work. If you haven't applied for one, do it this year. The connections and knowledge are invaluable. And so is the fun.

[Click here](#) to view Kurt's photos from the trip.