

ASHEVILLE scene

Field to Fryer in Asheville Local canola: the idea heats up among restaurateurs

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Figure 1 Peter Pollay is looking to use local canola oil at his restaurant Posana, at 1 Biltmore Ave.

F3 Canola Oil will be available to the public next year. For now, local chefs and restaurateurs can ask for the oil through Mountain Foods Products (255-7630 or orders@mountainfoodproducts.com) and through Blue Ridge Biofuels outside of the city (253-1034 or info@blueridgebiofuels.com).

The Field to Fryer to Fuel Project is working to provide local restaurateurs with a WNC-grown, non-GMO canola oil. Eventually, the groups behind the project hope to collect that oil to make a biodiesel with roots planted firmly in local soil.

The team behind F3, as the project is being called, includes AdvantageWest and Blue Ridge Food Ventures, Blue Ridge Biofuels and Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College (read about the entire team at blueridgebiofuels.com/cookingoil).

Local restaurateurs are getting behind the oil, too.

This month the F3 project produced its first batch of canola oil with help from Appalachian State University at a Catawba County research facility. One result is an unrefined canola oil, which is hand-pressed much like an olive oil. With its rich and nutty flavor, it's appropriate as a dressing or finishing oil.

“That one I like for dipping or for finishing something like a caprese salad,” said Peter Pollay, owner of Posana in downtown Asheville.

A second, more-refined oil can be used for frying and baking. It’s that spent oil that will eventually make it into fuel tanks.

For now, Katie Button, chef of Curate tapas restaurant in downtown Asheville, is particularly interested in the fry oil — something many restaurants burn through quickly.

Button, who, with her restaurant partners, was just granted the Sustainability Award from Star Chefs, credits programs like Blue Ridge Food Ventures for making it easy for local chefs like her to go even more local. Some items on Button’s menu are imported from Spain by necessity, but canola oil is something that nearly anyone can use, she said.

“We like that it’s a sustainable, non-GMO, locally made product,” she said.

Ron Townley, director of clean energy initiatives for AdvantageWest, said he hopes the F3 project can help address the debate about biofuel’s effect on food. “There is a debate out there nationally about food going into the biofuel marketplace and not being available for human consumption, particularly through corn being turned into ethanol in the Midwest,” said Townley.

Oil-seed crops like canola, said Townley, cannot be turned straight into biodiesel — at least not in an efficient way.

And canola, traditionally a Canadian crop, grows well in Western North Carolina when not much else will.

“The farmers make money, the food industry can buy local oil at a competitive price, and it can be captured and turned into biodiesel at a competitive price,” said Townley.

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