Annual Report

2024-2025



GROWING ChefS!



Our mission is to change the way children, youth, families and the greater community learn about and develop healthy relationships with food!



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STAFF AND BOARD

A heartfelt thank you from the Growing Chefs! team who brings our work to life every day

GROWING CHEFS! ONTARIO
ANNUAL REPORT
2024 - 2025

Letter from the Executive Director

Hello Everyone

As I sit down to write this year's recap, I find it to be the most difficult one yet. I guess that might be because this past year was in many ways the most difficult year we've ever had to navigate. Yes. Including the pandemic years. Back in 2020, like everyone else, we were navigating the chaos of a global pandemic. Fortunately, we secured several multi-year grants that both helped us open our facility at The Grove and provide stability through the uncertain years that followed.

2024 marked a major turning point. All of the grants and emergency supports that sustained us through those years ended within a six-month window. Anticipating this, we had spent years preparing—developing new fundraising strategies, creating roles focused on sustainability, rebuilding our corporate sponsorship program, and launching partnerships like the one with SVX/Verge to grow our social enterprise.

And it was working. In 2024, we were growing in the right ways. Our garden education programs expanded, our Learn to Grow, Grow to Give food box program thrived, and we laid the groundwork for an urban farm, in partnership with WSIB and the London Food Bank. We also transitioned away from COVID-era digital programming, launching new in-school programs for elementary schools and launching new secondary and post-secondary programs.

Then in early 2025, everything suddenly shifted. Global economic instability, political upheaval and uncertainty took over. Virtually overnight, corporate sponsorships vanished, event after event was cancelled or poorly attended, catering requests dried up, and donations slowed to a crawl. Every single income stream we'd carefully developed was impacted simultaneously.

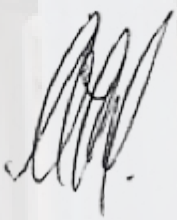
By mid-April, we went from "everything is fine" to wondering if we'd make it to summer. For the first time ever, we had to pause some program commitments and shift all our focus toward revenue generation. We launched an emergency fundraising campaign—and our community stepped up. We made it through, but just barely! And that struggle came at a cost: we reached 1,500 fewer children and youth than the year prior. Reallocating resources to our financial survival meant scaling back on impact. Something we need to ensure is never repeated.

The gratitude we feel for our community's support during those critical months is immense. If you were one of the many who showed up for us—we cannot thank you enough.

As we enter the 2025–26 fiscal year, we are starting with renewed hope. We've secured new multi-year grants to support the expansion of Learn to Grow, Grow to Give, which I'm so excited to share more info about later in this report. But on top of that, we've learned a vital lesson: we must never again be in a position where we're fundraising for programs that are already underway.

Going forward, we will be clear and transparent about timelines and the resources needed to meet our commitments. This is essential to ensuring our programs deliver the greatest possible impact and return on investment for our donors, investors and the community.

There's a lot to look forward to. We are excited, optimistic, and deeply grateful. Thank you for standing with us through it all.



Andrew Fleet
Executive Director & Co-Founder





Food Education Programs

What a milestone year!

We were everywhere—classrooms, kitchens, gardens, greenhouses and community spaces—and still, the demand for our programming is still growing!



WESTERN FAIR district

GROWING CHEFS!

PARTNERS IN FOOD & AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION

376 Food Education Programs

72 School and Community Partners

10,729 Food Education Participants from:

- **2**21 School Programs
- 101 Community Programs
- 54 Public Programs

3,101 students participating in our **Cultural Diversity Snack Project** with the Ontario Student Nutrition Program.





"Our students had the most amazing experiences with Growing Chefs. Thank you to you and your team for making these such fun and educational experiences for everyone. Our staff have nothing but great things to say.

Our DE teacher was especially thankful for how inclusive your team was and how they worked so hard to make sure her students enjoyed themselves."

-GCO In The Classroom Teacher



"We LOVE this program for the knowledge he gains and the enjoyment he has found in cooking because of it.

We have also been fortunate to have assistance given to us financially through the program to allow him to attend the Summer Camps - something he would not be able to access without that help.

We can't speak highly enough of the Growing Chefs! program!"

-Monthly Kid's Cooking Class Participant & Subsidy Fund Recipient

New Program: Learn to Grow; Grow to Give



This year, we expanded **The Learn to Grow; Grow to Give Project.** It combines **food literacy/education** and **food security programming** in innovative, efficient ways by growing and providing **fresh, healthy foods** for food insecure families, while delivering **equitable and accessible food education programming** for children, families and schools.



In the last year, this project delivered **over 550 food boxes** to food insecure families across the city while offering education programming in our gardens to over **4000** participants.

But we're just getting started, keep reading to learn more about how we plan to **keep this project growing!**



Check out the compilation of recent **Impact Reports** for more photos, testimonials and stories showcasing the impactful work we do!

Welcome to the Learn to Grow; Grow to Give Farm!







The next phase of this project will see the development of a **one-acre urban "farm"** to expand food box production and create new education and volunteer opportunities for the community. By combining food and environmental education with a food security initiative, the project promotes dignified food access, stronger community connections, and a greater sense of belonging for children and families.

In partnership with **WSIB (land provider)**, the **London Food Bank, Neighbourhood Resource Centres, OSNP volunteers, and School Support Counsellors**, the "Farm" will enable this program to support an additional **50–65 food-insecure families each month**, strengthen cross-sector collaboration, and engage over **1,000 more children in hands-on food education each year.**





The Londonlicious Festival helps bring our vision of a healthy, food-literate community to life!

2024 METRICS & VISIBILITY

Have you heard the buzz?

We've compiled all the data from 2024 and we're not the only ones who think **this festival rocks**...

99% of festival participants would participate again!

44 on average per festival **restaurants**

Total Estimated Participants **20k+**

$65 Per Person Average Spend

$1.1M Estimated revenue brought into our local economy in **2024**

Ontario Tourism Awards of Excellence 2023 Finalist

Londonlicious was nominated for its first award!

Combined Social Specs

Londonlicious and Growing Chefs! Ontario

6,290 Growing Chefs! Ontario Audience

14,770 Londonlicious Audience

3,671 Growing Chefs! Ontario Audience

9,254 Londonlicious Audience

Thank you to our festival sponsors!

Every sponsor of this bi-annual festival also contributes directly to our **children's education programs**.

For more information on the new Londonlicious Festival visit *www.londonlicious.ca*

Social Enterprise

Over the past year, we have partnered with SVX through the Verge Capital Social Finance Program to continue to increase the capacity of our Social Enterprise: our **Events & Catering** portfolio and **The Beet Hot Lunch Program**!

Our Social Enterprise acts as the financial backbone of the organization and is the foundation on which our Food Education Programs operate.





GCO + SVX

Growing Chefs!' partnership with SVX is helping us to increase our Social enterprise income by approximately **$325,000** annually **over 5 years** which will help to support the continued growth of our **education programs** and enable Growing Chefs! Ontario to **operate sustainably.**

Social Enterprise Income 2023-24: $906,059
Social Enterprise Income 2024-25: 1,050,886

Check out our **website** for more information on catering and events with GCO!



Feast ON

Growing Chefs! Ontario is also **proudly** Feast ON certified!

Feast ON is Ontario's local food certification program for restaurants, producers, and culinary tourism experiences.

Feast ON certification recognizes organizations committed to **sourcing and celebrating Ontario grown food and drink**.

Growing Chefs! Ontario's procurement practices **far exceed** the **25% baseline,** sourcing over 4**0% of our food and drink from our province!**

The Beet Kitchen: Hot Lunch Program

It was an exciting year for the Beet Kitchen which expanded its services to schools and camps across the region providing children with healthy lunches.

This year we partnered with **15 schools, child-care centres & community organizations,** delivering meals to **24 different locations** across the city daily.

That's approximately **125,000** hot lunches over the course of the year!

Here are some photo examples of our menu options from the past year!





"All of the staff were friendly and welcoming. Loved the hands on cooking and learning that we did. The explanation of the dish we were making and the next steps for us to complete a task were well explained.

Sitting down to enjoy the meal together was a fun experience. I had dietary restrictions and everyone was very kind and accommodating to my needs."

- MACC Participant



"Congratulations on how much you have grown and including more restaurants.

I love the variety."

- Londonlicious Participant



"The entire experience was not only fun and memorable, but also so thoughtfully run from start to finish.

It's rare to come across a place where you can feel the heart behind the mission, We left not only with full stomachs, but also with a real appreciation for the good work you're doing and the values you represent!"

- Natalie T., Event Attendee

A Retrospective

Dear Growing Chefs! Community,

I started at Growing Chefs! Ontario this past March as our Communications Steward. In the short time that I've been with this organization, I've seen the unique and essential role we play in our community, and my hope is to illustrate my experience in this letter.

I arrived at GCO during a period of major transition and uncertainty. Our organization was emerging from a challenging Spring marked by funding shortfalls and rapid shifts in strategy. This initial experience gave me valuable context as to how the end of these long-term grants and emergency supports created these new financial pressures.

I was able to witness first-hand the passion and resilience that got our team through an incredibly difficult and uncertain season. I saw how years of thoughtful growth—expanding education programs, launching The Beet Kitchen, building the Learn to Grow; Grow to Give initiative—laid strong foundations that were now being tested. In an incredibly short window of time, we had to focus our fundraising efforts on an emergency campaign to ensure we could deliver on programming commitments we made before economic and political instability forced us to consider scaling back our educational programming.

I also saw, despite this uncertainty, a community – **OUR** community – mobilized to ensure we could continue running those essential programs. But the challenge of shifting our focus to sustaining our organization came with a cost. Our reach decreased by **1,500 children and youth** compared to the previous year. The lesson of that time is two-fold for me: while it is evidently clear that our community steps up when we need them, remaining transparent with our funding goals and commitments is the essential prerequisite for ensuring we're never in this position again.

That's where I come into this story...

Transparent communication and authentic storytelling can inspire action and generosity. We feel immense gratitude toward our staff, donors, volunteers, community partners and supporters who made it possible to stabilize this ship. My goal is to strengthen donor communications, stewardship practices, and funding transparency. I'm going to help tell and share stories that highlight the tangible impact of our community's support—turning lessons learned into motivation for long-term sustainability.

I'm excited to help shape a more proactive, transparent, and sustainable fundraising approach. We remain hopeful about new multi-year grants and partnerships that will fuel both stability and innovation.

Above all, I'm profoundly grateful to be part of such a passionate, mission-driven team entering a new chapter with clarity, humility, and optimism.



Ben Elliott
Communications Steward



HELP US GROW!

2025/2026 Funding Priorities & Timelines

Food Education Programs

Our programs provide hands-on, experiential learning opportunities designed to improve food literacy and an understanding of food systems. Our programming is evidence-based and consistently shows significant increases in food literacy levels amongst participants.

Target Goal 2025-26: 10,000 participants from **July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2026**
Funding Target: $150,000 to support program operations by **Dec 31, 2025**

Learn to Grow; Grow to Give

We have launched a one acre urban farm and will be working the full site this growing season to grow more food boxes, expand education programs, and create volunteer opportunities — all while strengthening community connections and improving dignified access to fresh, local food.

Target Goal: Grow and distribute 15,000+ lbs of fresh produce to families
Funding Target: $50,000 to support capital purchases by **Feb 28, 2026**
$50,000 to support project operations by **June 30, 2026**

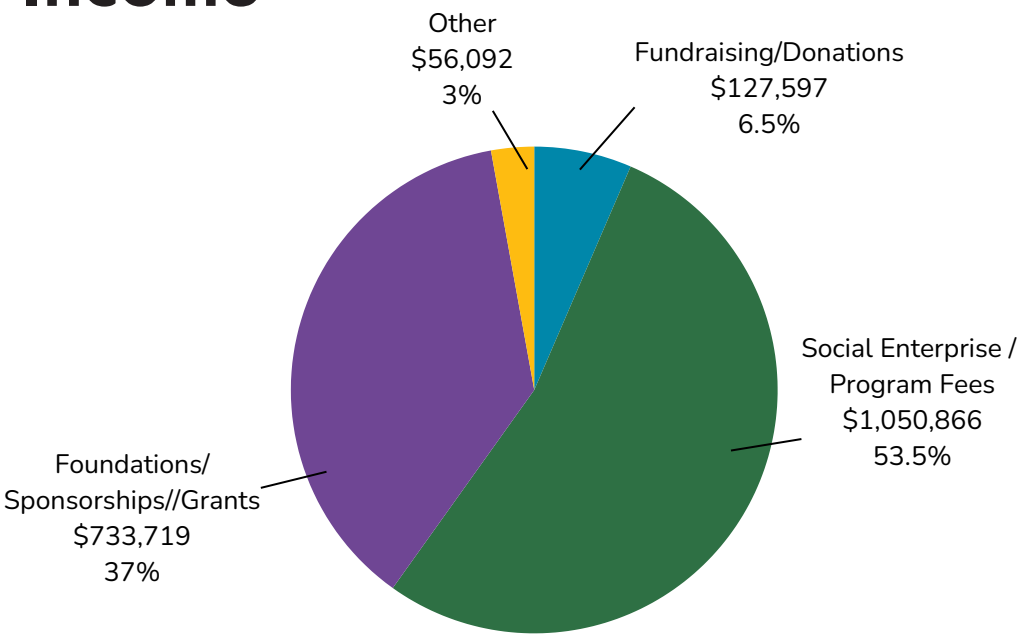
Food Education Subsidy Fund

The demand for our Subsidy Fund has remained consistently strong, highlighting just how essential it is in ensuring our programs remain equitable and accessible. The subsidy fund allows us to offer our programs in an equitable and accessible manner, allowing us to deliver programs to children and families that would otherwise be unable to afford to participate. Everyone should have the opportunity to participate!

Target Goal: Support 100% of subsidy applications
Funding Target: $15,000 by **March 31, 2026**

2024-2025 Audited Financials

Income

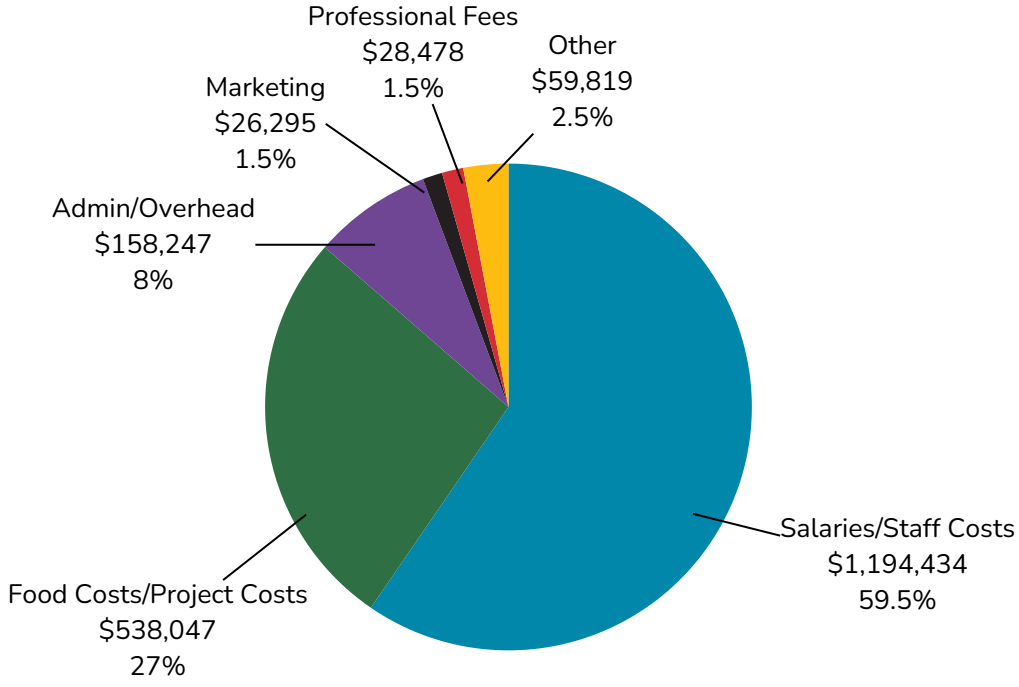


Total Revenue
$1,968,274

Total Expenditures
$2,005,320

Expenses

Total Revenue over Expenses
$-37,046



The 2024 - 2025 School Food Education Project is presented by our Title Sponsor:

WESTERN FAIR district

With the generosity of the following Corporate Sponsors and Community Partners:

Libro CREDIT UNION

canada life™

TOURISM London CANADA

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McFarlan Rowlands Insurance Brokers Inc

Ontario Processing Vegetable Growers

Harrison Pensa PERSONAL INJURY LAWYERS

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Colborne Street United Church
Local Outreach Committee

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FRIENDS of the London Civic Garden COMPLEX

Grand River Agricultural Society

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Slegers living organic greens

SPM Financial™ MANAGE YOUR RISK. GROW YOUR WEALTH.

We are fortunate to have the generous support of Grants, Individual Donors and Private Foundations $10,000 +:

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London Canada

Peter Gilgan Foundation

Westminster College Foundation

The Schad Foundation

TreeCanada

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Peter & Catherine Clark Family Foundation

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Rocca Hunter Family Foundation

Richard and Shelley Baker Family Foundation

Cambia Development Foundation

Estate of Jeanne Olliver

We are fortunate to have the generous support of Grants, Individual Donors and Private Foundations $500 - $9,999:

Auberge du Petit Prince Inc.

ROOTS Community Fund

Making a Difference - C & J Wright Family Fund

The Gate Key Foundation

Nature London Community Eco-Grants Program

Whole Kids Garden Grant

Dana Lambe

Brian & Sharon Lessard

Vincent Chicoine

Libby McMillan

Jordan Hypes

John Wojcik

Milton and Jean Broderick Charitable Fund

Gord Hart

Janet Stewart

100 Women Who Care - London and Area

Libby McMillan

Carolyn Luistro

Ian Smith & Janet Fleet

Enterprise Mobility Foundation

Nigel and Rhonda Gilby Foundation

Christine Scheer & John Wilson

Heather Manness

Les Siemieniuk & Jackie Bell

Mary Hajpel

Justin Pilon & Sarah Emms-Pilon

Axay Sharma and LeeAnn Ungar

Natasha Roberts

London Waldorf School

Mortgage Wise Financial

Ivey Community Connects Internship

Optimist Club of Byron

Joel Bakker

Jo-Anne Hammond

We are proud of our in-kind supporters:

We are fortunate to have received generous support through:

Our Growing Team

Thank you to all of our amazing staff, Board members and volunteers for all of your tireless work this year. None of this would have been possible without you!



Staff

Sawaiz Ashraf
Katie Bettinger
Katie Bennett
Laine Barnfield
Christy Cook
William Cowan
Paige Downey
Ben Elliott
Rian Fennell
Tici Figueiredo
Andrew Fleet
Mac Gozon
Jordan Grecia
Ilana Guslits
Aron Guslits
Lauren Ibbott
Mike Johnston
Katherine Jones
Ehaan Kwan
Camryn Latif
Meredith Lewkowitz
Maria Lierman
Leila McBeth
Natalio Meijia
Justin O'Reilly
Eve Pisano
Matt Rice
Jayme Russell
Matt Rylett
Mojdeh Shams
Joel Silva
Jen Wyant



Our Volunteers

This year we welcomed 66 volunteers who contributed a whopping 1025 hours towards our programs and events! Please contact lauren@growingchefsontario.ca if you'd like to start, or restart, volunteering!

Letter from our Board Chair

For the past 10 years I've had the privilege to see up close how Growing Chefs! has embedded itself in our community as a leader in food education, food security, and food systems change. The results speak for themselves - nearly 400 food education programs delivered to over 10,000 participants annually. I'm continuously impressed by how far Growing Chefs! has spread its reach over those 10 years.

I'm so proud of the work Growing Chefs! does every day. While my time on the Board of Directors comes to an end, I'm excited for what Growing Chefs! will do next with the valued contributions of individual donors, corporate sponsors, foundation and grant partners, volunteers, and community supporters.

Jordan Hypes - Co-Board Chair

It is an honour to step into the role of Board Chair for Growing Chefs! Ontario. Having been involved in a board capacity since 2023 and with a deep personal connection to the organization, I am truly excited to see what this incredibly dedicated team can do in the years to come. I would like to extend a note of gratitude to my predecessor Jordan Hypes, whose commitment and passion for the organization leaves me with big shoes to fill. I know I speak for the entire GCO community in thanking him for his efforts over the years.

My late Father instilled in me at a young age the importance of serving one's community passionately. I cannot think of a better way to honour that sentiment than by working together to continue strengthening GCO's impact, fostering local collaboration and working towards our Mission and Vision."

Josh Fentin - Co-Board Chair





2024 - 2025 Board Members

Jordan Hypes: 2016 - Present (Co - Board Chair)
Josh Fentin: 2023 - Present (Co - Board Chair)
Mary Hajpel: 2021 - Present (Treasurer)
Michael Clark: 2022 - Present (Secretary)
Andrew Wolwowicz: 2010 - Present
Caitlin Fisher: 2023 - Present
Gord Hart 2024 - Present
Dara Lambe - 2024 - Present
Brooklyn Einwiller 2024 - Present
Nicholas Cardelli: 2023 - 2025





Our vision is to build and maintain a healthy, empowered community that is engaged with our food system.



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Growing Chefs! Ontario

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