



Youth Food Leaders
Nourish Nova Scotia

Membertou Youth Centre

2025 Program Summary



Introduction

The Membertou Youth Food Leaders program grew out of a collaborative, community-driven effort. Island Food Network (IFN) and Feed Nova Scotia partnered to explore innovative, locally led solutions to food access in Unama'ki. Building on the success of the pre-Covid Community Food Leader Program, and drawing from Nourish Nova Scotia's expertise in youth food literacy, leadership, and engagement, the partners saw an opportunity to adapt emerging Youth Food Leaders programming to a Mi'kmaq community context. From this shared vision, the partnership took shape.

Nourish Nova Scotia's Indigenous Food Coordinator engaged several Unama'ki Mi'kmaq communities to gauge interest, and the Membertou Youth Centre stepped forward as a committed partner—eager to anchor programming in youth leadership, traditional knowledge, and food skills. Island Food Network contributed its expertise in food access innovation and program evaluation, while Nourish Nova Scotia and the Membertou Youth Centre co-led coordination, design, delivery, outreach, and evaluation. Together, they ensured the program was firmly rooted in community priorities.

Following youth consultations and design sessions in spring 2025, the program launched that summer for ages 10–14, creating a vibrant space where food served as a bridge to culture, confidence, and community.

Over six months, participants took part in hands-on workshops—from smoothie labs and jam-making to lobster cooking and beekeeping—that sparked curiosity, trust, and leadership. More than cooking, the program was about youth claiming space, shaping their food story, and becoming catalysts for connection and future community food sovereignty.



Program Summary

21 Direct Youth Participants

200+ Indirect Participants: Youth cooking with families at home; Community feast attendees; Event participants.

3 Program Partners: Membertou Youth Centre, Nourish Nova Scotia, Island Food Network

Activities and Impact

11 Workshops Delivered: Smoothie lab, jam-making, beekeeping, baking, pop-up picnic, lobster feast, cooking with leftovers, putting the gardens to bed, corn teaching, and a final feast.

12 Meals Shared: Prepared by youth, including take-home meals for families and community members.



Program Highlight:

Final Workshop: Community Feast! Youth cooked 150 portions of lasagna and ceasar-salad with a chef from Millbrook First Nation that was then distributed by volunteers to elders and community members across Membertou!



Evaluation Approach

Our evaluation strategy blended **reflection** and **outcome-based methods** to both learn and adapt during implementation and assess long-term impact. This strategy allowed us to:

- Learn and adapt as the program unfolded.
- Identify the key components of community-led food access and explore how these could be extended for systemic impact.
- Share insights on intended outcomes and invite new partners for future iterations.

Our evaluation sought to understand the role of youth in driving community change and how a contextualized program could best support this.

Tools and Reflective practices used:

Participant Feedback

Collected through one-on-one conversations, group discussions, and integrated activities.

Peer Evaluation

Involved capturing quotes, photos, and stories during workshops.

Team Debriefs

Held regularly to reflect on successes, challenges, and adjustments.

Thematic Areas of Reflection

Embedded in all methods: food sovereignty and culture, knowledge and know-how building, food access, and innovation in youth leadership.

Journey Documentation

Documentation of the journey through photos and videos.





Impact Areas

Food Sovereignty & Culture: Planting Seeds of Pride & Connection

The Youth Food Leaders program rooted food experiences in Mi'kmaq values of respect, reciprocity, and resourcefulness. Through hands-on activities such as lobster cooking, gardening, and beekeeping, youth came to see food as a living relative, embodying teachings like *netukulimk* and *etuaptmumk* (two-eyed seeing). Cultural knowledge holders—including guest facilitators from the Beaver Clan of the Oneida Nation and Millbrook First Nation—enriched these experiences by connecting food with storytelling and the Mi'kmaq language. Their contributions strengthened intergenerational ties and fostered nation-to-nation relationships, deepening the cultural resonance of each experience.

Youth exercised choice and agency in what to cook and share with community members, cultivating pride, confidence, and curiosity.

This autonomy encouraged creativity while reinforcing cultural values. Facilitators observed that youth are “planting seeds” - absorbing cultural knowledge that will continue to grow beyond the program. Food became more than nourishment—it became a gateway to culture, confidence, and community pride.



Building Knowledge and Know-How

Through the program, youth built practical skills and confidence in hands-on workshops. They learned knife safety, cleanliness, and teamwork, with repetition fostering both confidence and curiosity. Activities such as baking, cooking with leftovers, and gardening encouraged resourcefulness and creativity, while lobster cracking and beekeeping sparked a deep sense of engagement and pride.

Facilitators observed visible growth: youth experimented with new foods—bee pollen, lobster, even adding cauliflower to smoothies—and youth celebrated milestones like “watching my brother learn how to use a knife”. **These moments of experiential learning set the foundation for lifelong skills, empowering youth to lead with confidence and food knowledge and know-how.**

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We’re hoping to spark interest in them becoming food leaders. That doesn’t have to be becoming a chef. It can be as simple as a young person deciding, ‘I want to grow up to be a harvester for elders in the community,’ ‘I want to learn to go fish lobster and shre with community members - or get into politics and strive for changes’ - or anywhere in between.

- Sakej Doucette, Indigenous Food Coordinator
quoted in Cape Breton Post, December 16, 2025 issue



Supporting Youth & Community Food Access

Youth were provided with meals and snacks during workshops designed to foster a welcoming, stigma-free environment.

Hands-on sessions highlighted affordable, nutritious cooking skills—from baking to making use of leftovers—and empowered participants to prepare meals both at home and within their community.

Facilitators acknowledged the realities of food insecurity in Membertou, recognizing that not all youth have access to leftovers or gardens to grow food. Gardening workshops served as a bridge to food access, introducing skills that many participants had not previously been able to practice at home. The programming modeled community care, honoring diverse circumstances and emphasizing that needing support is never a personal failing. From this, youth developed an interest in creating opportunities for community feasts where they could cook together and support others in their community.



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“What we’re learning here at the centre is to do things for other people”

“It makes me feel good to feed the people”

- Youth participants



Fostering Innovation, Agency & Leadership

By fostering a supportive and playful environment, staff observed youth gaining confidence to take risks, think creatively, and learn from one another. Evaluation and feedback activities captured youth voices, with reflections such as feeling proud for “staying calm around bees” or “adding milk without spilling” when baking muffins. Workshops encouraged experimentation—for example, the Smoothie Lab, where unexpected ingredients transformed cooking into a fun challenge.

Youth exercised agency beyond recipes, proposing fundraising through baking and organizing community feasts. Challenges became opportunities: hesitant participants used cameras and photography to engage with bees from a comfortable distance, while experienced youth taught lobster cracking to their peers, reinforcing collaboration and adaptability.

Facilitators noted that youth consistently supported one another and initiated new ideas, making peer learning a powerful driver of innovation.

Creativity grew beyond play—it evolved into agency, problem-solving, and leadership.



Program Learnings

Building Strong Partnerships for Sustainable Impact

Insights from our collaboration highlighted the opportunity to embed a distinct partnership phase into program development to enhance sustainability and ensure partnerships remain resilient and impactful. This would involve a more formal partnership model that intentionally prioritizes relationship-building to establish trust and mutual understanding. It would also enable more shared planning and in-person engagement, strengthening connection, collaboration, and communication.

The Youth Food Leaders program in Membertou First Nation brought together three organizations—the Membertou Youth Centre, Nourish Nova Scotia, and the Island Food Network—for the first time. While the collaboration successfully delivered programming, the process revealed valuable lessons in partnership development. The initial approach moved quickly into program design; however, a dedicated partnership-building phase prior to implementation could have alleviated challenges related to coordination and role clarity.

Although time for partnership development among organizations was limited, meaningful youth engagement thrived thanks to existing trusted relationships. Membertou’s Youth Program Coordinator, Katie Kaiser, played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of safety and continuity for youth and their families. Her consistent presence, combined with the Membertou Youth Centre serving as “home turf” for programming, encouraged youth to feel at ease in a familiar space and helped nurture autonomy, inclusion, and confidence. While the program framework can be adapted to different spaces and communities, its success ultimately depends on youth having the support and mentorship of trusted adults to meaningfully engage and grow with the program over time.



Strengthening Understanding & Connection within the Broader Community

The implementation of the program in Membertou underscored the importance of an intentional approach to securing community buy-in and engaging traditional knowledge holders prior to delivery. These steps are essential for fostering trust, generating interest, and ensuring that cultural teachings are meaningfully integrated into the program.

As the program moved into delivery, it was anticipated that cultural facilitators from the local community would play a central role in shaping culturally relevant content and experiences for youth. While this did occur once the program was established, the early phase revealed that program staff initially needed to fulfill these roles. Although the reasons for this were not immediately clear, staff responded by dedicating time outside of scheduled programming to build relationships and deepen community understanding of the initiative.

Membertou Youth Centre's Program Coordinator, together with Nourish Nova Scotia's Indigenous Food Coordinator—already a trusted community member and knowledge keeper—played a pivotal role. Their investment of time, both within and beyond program activities, helped build trust with youth, reinforced the program's cultural foundation, and strengthened community connection. Over time, this commitment led to community members expressing interest in both supporting and actively participating in the program.



Nurturing Community Alignment with through Holistic Planning

The Youth Food Leaders program highlighted the importance of planning that is deeply attuned to Mi'kmaq ways of working and the rhythms of community life.

Rather than adhering to rigid timelines, planning must create space for cultural practices, land-based learning, and seasonal dynamics—both environmental and social. This requires understanding what is already happening in the community and adapting program activities to complement existing initiatives.

The nature of the program and the Membertou community called for an approach that was emergent and responsive to youth and community needs, many of which could not be anticipated in advance. Youth engagement was shaped by seasonal changes and the busy environment of the Youth Centre, requiring flexibility and respect for community ownership. Adaptive scheduling—often planned week to week—allowed the program to align with community rhythms and youth priorities. This meant adjusting for unforeseen community events or shifting land-based sessions to accommodate weather and participation. Ultimately, programming must embrace holistic and adaptive planning that reflects community rhythms and youth priorities in order to remain accessible, culturally relevant, and effective.



Fostering Sustainability through Repeated Exposure

The Youth Food Leaders program demonstrated that repetition and long-term exposure are essential for sustainability, community buy-in, and youth investment in knowledge-building. One-time experiences cannot foster the confidence, leadership, and continuity needed for meaningful engagement. Over time, repeated opportunities allowed youth to practice skills, take responsibility, and initiate ideas—showing that confidence and collaboration grow through consistent, hands-on experiences.

Sustainability also depends on working closely with community partners to embed these experiences into their structures and to invest in infrastructure that bridges programming with community life. Key examples include:

- **Equipment:** The purchase of a deep freezer and other equipment enables youth to prepare food for community feasts, positioning the Youth Centre as a hub for intergenerational sharing and learning, now and into the future.
- **Transportation:** Access to the community school bus allowed youth to participate in land-based field trips, removing barriers to engagement.
- **Garden Infrastructure:** Building and renovating physical garden spaces ensured continued access to food-growing opportunities, especially for youth without gardens at home.



Looking Ahead

The Youth Food Leaders program in Membertou has shown that food is far more than sustenance—it is a catalyst for cultural continuity, youth empowerment, and community resilience. By embedding Mi'kmaq values and fostering spaces for leadership, creativity, and intergenerational learning, the program has planted seeds of lasting impact. With continued collaboration and investment, these efforts will grow into sustainable programs that advance equity, cultural pride, and collective well-being, ensuring long-term benefits for youth and the community.

