

Wanted: Organic farmers to fill Toronto's markets

As consumers' appetite for fresh, local food sharpens, it's getting harder to find rural suppliers for neighbourhood stalls

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Special to The Globe and Mail

May 24, 2008

Harry Stoddart didn't want to go to market. At least, that wasn't his plan. But Mr. Stoddart and his wife, Silvia, certified organic farmers near Little Britain, Ont., knew that they had to start doing things a little differently. Though they owned about 227 hectares of land and the family had been farming for six generations since their ancestors emigrated from Ireland in 1819, the future wasn't looking quite as bright as it should have.

"We had a wake-up call when we discovered we could buy certified organic, processed flax from China for less than we were paying [local] farmers," says Mr. Stoddart, who grows organic spelt wheat and flax, among other things, on his farm. "Organic grains have turned into an international commodity business now. We can't compete with China."

So Mr. Stoddart thought he would try his hand at supplying restaurant chefs. But when word hit Toronto about his fresh duck eggs, guinea fowl and heirloom vegetables, Handford (Cookie) Roscoe came calling.

Ms. Roscoe, who was in the midst of planning the pilot Green Barn Farmers' Market, near Bathurst and St. Clair, told him that she had shoppers who would go crazy for his stuff. "She called me at least once a month through the winter," Mr. Stoddart recalls. "I've never had anyone stalk me the way Cookie did." Eventually, the farmer agreed to give her new market a try.

Ms. Roscoe was right: Her shoppers were hungry. Much to his surprise, Mr. Stoddart - and every other vendor at the first Green Barn market last year - sold out within an hour.

Today marks the opening of the second season of the Don Valley's Brick Works Farmers' Market and the Green Barn, which is still in its temporary location in a church parking lot near Wychwood Avenue.

In the coming weeks, four more new markets will open across the city, bringing to 17 the number of Toronto markets registered by Farmers' Market Ontario. There's just one problem: There may not be enough farmers.

Some market organizers are still scrambling to fill stalls, hiring recruiters to scour the province for farmers willing to brave the 401.

"The number of farmers in Ontario is diminishing daily," explains Bob Chorney, executive director of Farmers' Market Ontario, which runs its own markets under the "MyMarket" banner.

Mr. Chorney is also responsible for three of the four new farmers' markets opening in the next couple of weeks in Toronto. To help fill the stalls, he hired Bernt Solymar to scour the province for farmers.

Mr. Solymar says he has contacted more than 450 farmers within a two-hour drive to Toronto and logged 100 hours on the project this spring. So far, he has turned up only 12 new farmers. Mr. Chorney had to scrap plans for a market at Ramsden Park and is still scrambling to fill two new MyMarket stalls, one at East Lynn Park near Danforth and Woodbine and another at the Hospital for Sick Children downtown.

Mr. Chorney says many farmers have told him they can't afford to drive into the city. Rising fuel costs and the hassle of Toronto's traffic are two major deterrents.

Mr. Stoddart estimates that he gets one e-mail a week inviting him to take part in markets in Toronto.

This season, the Stoddarts have decided to add the Brick Works to their roster. It's proving to be a useful learning experience for the five Stoddart children, who range in age from 4 to 15 and have begun helping their parents operate the market side of the family business. "We're going gangbusters on that side of the business."

The Toronto markets are proving to be more profitable (and fun) than losing a price battle with China. Most farmers expect to take home a minimum of \$1,000, gross, from part of a day at a farmers' market, but when the markets get into full swing, Mr. Stoddart says, he can double that number.

He says about 90 per cent of the products he sells in Toronto are produced by his farm. Other items come from neighbours - one woman gives him extra duck eggs, for example.

"Now that the word's out about the duck eggs, I could probably auction them off on Queen West," jokes the farmer, who struggles to keep up with the demand from restaurants such as Thuet and Czechoski.

Bringing in a neighbour's produce makes sense for farmers like Mr. Stoddart: It saves on fuel costs and puts more food on the table at market stalls. For the farmer who stays behind, it means more time to work in the fields actually growing stuff. But some of Toronto's markets don't allow for such efficiencies, which is compounding the current shortage.

Mr. Chorney's MyMarket locations, for example, will only certify (and accommodate) farmers who sell what they grow. It sounds like a great idea: Their certification is meant to ensure that consumers get only the freshest produce and don't get duped into buying imports or from the Ontario Food Terminal, the wholesale clearing house for the province.

Mr. Chorney claims that this protects farmers from unfair competition. In a bizarre twist, a large grower might even find itself competing against its own product at a farmers market - the next stall over might be reselling the very melons it delivered to the Food Terminal.

"We had a very serious problem at markets in Toronto," Mr. Chorney says.

Nevertheless, some farmers have their noses out of joint, saying it's hard enough to make a profit at the markets without imposing such restrictions on what they can sell.

In some cases, following Mr. Chorney's MyMarket rules would be illegal. In the case of value-added products, such as yogurt and cheese, 51 per cent of the ingredients must come from the farm where they are made. Which is a problem: In Ontario, nearly all cheese makers are required, by law, to buy their milk from the Dairy Farmers of Ontario, unless they can afford to purchase a very expensive on-farm processing licence.

Even the Brick Works and Riverdale, which are managed by retired teacher Elizabeth Harris, do not meet Mr. Chorney's stringent standards: Although nearly all the produce is sold by the farmer who grew it, Ms. Harris makes an exception for local cocoa processors and coffee-bean roasters.

In the Roncesvalles area, the new Sorauren Farmers' Market, which is modelling itself on the busy Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market, has opted for a 70/30 rule: Up to 30 per cent of what a farmer sells can come from a neighbour.

"We want to support the growers and prevent resellers, but bringing in a neighbour's produce is probably a good idea in terms of gas costs," says Sorauren's manager, Filip Harderer. Mr. Harderer, who developed close ties with his local farmers while working at the Annex's venerable food co-operative, Karma Co-op, says he is just one fruit grower short of a full roster.

On a cultural level, the new markets could have a huge impact on the city: Sorauren Market in gentrifying Roncesvalles is poised to become a hub for its socially conscious, liberally minded inhabitants. Likewise, East Lynn's MyMarket, near Woodbine and Danforth, has the potential to reimagine the no man's land east of Riverdale and north of the Beaches.

But if Toronto wants access to more local foods in this city - whether at farmers' markets or anywhere else - it may make sense to encourage farmers to work together to form small distribution networks to get products to the city, especially in the face of rising fuel and production costs.

And surely that's the point: to chew the fat with the vendors and buy directly from the people you trust. As Graeme Hussey, one of Sorauren Market's organizers, puts it, "Certification just complicates things."

Share and share alike

While people like Bob Chorney of Farmers' Market Ontario say they are having a hard time locating farmers to come to markets, there are others who can't find markets that will take them.

Mark Trealout, a farmer in the Kawarthas, has devised a distribution network among more than a dozen fellow farmers and brings a full truck of organic goodies to top chefs like Jamie Kennedy and Anthony Walsh. Now he wants to do the same for the general public. The only problem is that most

markets won't allow him to sell his neighbours' stuff. "That's the thin edge of the wedge," says Mr. Chorney.

Undeterred, Mr. Trealout is now offering community-supported agriculture "shares," which allow customers to buy shares in the farm, or co-op, for the season, in exchange for fresh-food deliveries. He is also organizing a weekly drop-off at Culinarium, a shop on Mt. Pleasant devoted to all things local. "Everyone wins," says Mr. Trealout. "The farmers save on distribution costs, and consumers pay less than they would at a farmers' market."

See <http://www.kawarthaecogrowers.locallygrown.net> or Culinarium, 705 Mt. Pleasant Rd., 647-430-7004.

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