



Growing the Local Bounty: Reports from Farmlands in Flux in Ontario and BC

*A Tyee Solutions Series,
Published by The Tyee, The Waterloo Region Record,
and Small Farmer Magazine (forthcoming)*



Tyee Solutions Society

Reporters Colleen Kimmett and Jeff Nield and photographer Justin Langille journeyed through the greenbelts outside Vancouver and Toronto to gauge the health of local food systems and to find out from growers, processors and distributors what's working to make local food truly sustainable.

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The entire series is available at
<http://thetyee.ca/Series/2010/10/28/GrowingTheLocalBounty/>

Field Notes

By Colleen Kimmett

My neighbourhood in East Vancouver abounds with local, sustainable food. At the weekly farmers' market, I stock up on organic fruits and vegetables. At the seafood shop down the street, I can buy wild B.C. sockeye. My own backyard hens provide a daily supply of fresh eggs.

I know that the local food movement is thriving in neighbourhoods like mine across the country. But I'm also acutely aware that these local eating meccas exist in isolated pockets. The majority

of Canadians shop at major grocery stores that rely on global supply chains. And most Canadian farmers are losing out in this globalized food system, where cheap labour and lower standards make it hard to stay competitive. It's no wonder that huge swaths of farmland have been sold for urban development, further threatening our ability to become food secure.

This daunting reality is what spurred us to embark on the multi-part series, [Growing the Local Bounty: Reports from Farmlands in Flux](#). For two months in the fall of 2010, we reporters – Colleen Kimmett and Jeff Nield – travelled along with photographer Justin Langille to two of the most productive agricultural regions in the entire country: Ontario's Greenbelt and British Columbia's Fraser Valley. The series' subtitle, "Farmlands in Flux," reflects the fact that we appear to be at tipping point in our food history.

It's inevitable, say the policy makers, food activists and academics that we talked to, that peak oil will drastically reduce the distance that most food now travels from field to plate. Which is why it's crucial to develop strong local and regional food systems now, and to look at solutions that can be scaled-up and replicated.

On our journey, we learned about how new systems are being forged at a community level. Farmers' markets are growing at a national rate of 30 per cent a year, pumping \$3.1 billion dollars into local economies. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects, like [Urban Grain](#) or [Home Grow-In](#) in Vancouver, have no trouble finding members, doubling or tripling their numbers in the first few years.

We met farmers who go to great lengths to supply customers with the local goods they



can't find on the supermarket shelves. Like Jim Grieshaber-Otto in Agassiz, B.C., who found and refurbished a 90-year-old grain cleaner to supply local flour to a bunch of city folks. In Elmira, ON, we met a group of Mennonite farmers who invest cooperatively in an auction warehouse, a kind of one-stop shopping for local retailers who don't have time to deal with individual farmers.

We learned that, despite the troubling statistics about agriculture, young people are getting into farming and finding success with small-scale production. In Brampton, ON, we spoke to Eric Rosenkrantz at the McVean Incubator farm, who, along with his business partner, pulls in \$25,000 off each of his three-acre plots per season.

We also visited the Kwantlen University's farm school, one of a handful of venues in B.C. where eager students can learn the ins and outs of farming. UBC's eight-month long Sowing Seeds sustainable agriculture practicum is entering its fourth year. Much like the Kwantlen program, it's a mixture of practical classroom learning and hands-on experience.

We learned that what's needed now to support this grassroots work is infrastructure and policy to connect the dots. Such as municipally-funded food hubs, like the proposed New City Market in Vancouver; a place to store, sell and buy local food, but also promote public education around food. Or by connecting health and social services with local agriculture, like the [Stop Community Food Centre](#) in Toronto has done. The Stop was one of the first food banks in the city, now it offers drop-in meals, community gardens, a discounted farmers' market and cooking classes.

All of these examples reaffirmed to us that food is not just what's on your plate. It is perhaps the most effective means we have to mobilize positive social, political and environmental change. Hope you find these stories as inspiring as we did!

Colleen Kimmett



Feedback on the series

“I finally had a chance to read your story, and just wanted to pass on a big thank you. Maybe it will help to move things along a little!”

From Andy Dolberg, executive director of the [BC Agriculture Council](#)

“Great article – thanks very much! I knew you guys wouldn’t garble us...”

From Kathryn Scharf, program director of [The Stop Community Food Centre](#)

“I saw your article and thought it was a very good treatment of the auction and jaywest. Thanks for the coverage.”

From Peter Katona, executive director of [FoodLink Waterloo](#)

“I appreciate the breadth, detail and balance *The Tye* is providing to the local food discussion. It is fantastic to have an in-depth series on food five years after the 100-Mile-Diet series. Not sure if this was intentional, but it is a great anniversary marker to show that things are happening in the food and agriculture scene.”

From Christopher Bodnar, farmer and local food activist in Vancouver

Lena Soots, professor of sustainable community development at Simon Fraser University, sent her students a link to the series with this message:

“Hi everyone,

The Tye is an awesome BC-based indie media site that is doing an amazing series on Local Food right now. It ties in perfectly with the course and is great reading. Check it out!”

Tara McDonald, executive director of [Vancouver Farmers’ Markets](#) sent this out to her network:

“Dear Vancouver Farmers Markets Vendors, Members & Supporters,
I'd like to draw your attention to what will be the most comprehensive reporting on local food system development to date, focusing on both BC and Ontario. Follow this series in *The Tye* over the next few weeks if you can, as it will provide a tonne of background and, important updates on what is and needs to be done now to develop and scale-up our local food system. . .”

Our story on The Stop Community Food Centre made the top five most emailed list on *The Tye* and was ‘tweeted’ widely. “We want one in Surrey!” wrote the [Surrey Mission Foodbank](#).

Karen Hobbs at the Unitarian Services Centre posted stories on the centre’s website and

chat room.

Gayl Creutzberg posted excerpts from the story 'A Nursery for New Farmers' on her blog, the [Gumboot Gourmet](#)

Kristin Sponsler, co-editor of the [Energy Bulletin](#), republished six articles on their site

Jenny MacLeod, secretary to the District A Farmers Institutes, wrote this:

"I would love to circulate these articles to my lists of farmers and farm organizations. I found the first one I read "A Nursery for New Farmers" very inspiring. Please let me do this as we have quite a few farmers groups who really need some kind of model for a new initiative for new farmers in BC.

I recently attended the Vancouver Island Economic Conference, and when I announced myself as a farmers' advocate and representative I received many enthusiastic invitations to talk to communities about implementing local farming programs.

Since then I have been actively searching for models of such a program. This could be it. Many thanks for your attention to this."

The praise for this series of articles continues to come in, with new readers sending the stories to their colleagues, friends, and family, and posting them on Facebook and Twitter.

A Tale of Two Farmlands

Growing the local bounty in Ontario and BC, a new series that goes to the roots of sustainable solutions.

By Colleen Kimmett,

Originally published on October 22, 2010,

<http://thetyee.ca/News/2010/10/22/TwoFarmlands/>

You're probably eager to find and eat all the delicious, nutritious, reasonably priced local food you can get your hands on.

But who's going to grow it? Who is going to gather it and get it to your local store shelves? After all, local food isn't sustainable if local producers can't get by.

The average Canadian income in this industry is \$8,000 per year (a number that has decreased steadily since the 1950s).

Canadian farmers are getting older (the average age of a farmer is 52 years old) and fewer of their children are there to replace them.

There is less land on which to grow healthy food (since the 1970s, Canada has lost more than 14,000 square kilometres of its most fertile soil to urban development).

Canadian farmers are losing out in a global market, where cheaper labour costs and fluctuating exchange rates make it harder to stay competitive. (The Okanagan Valley once grew and packed about 10 million boxes of apples and pears every year -- now that number has dropped to 2.5 million.)

Those are some of the daunting facts that spurred us to embark on the multi-part series that begins today: *Growing the Local Bounty: Reports from Farmlands in Flux.*



For the past two months, we reporters -- Colleen Kimmett, Justin Langille and Jeff Nield -- traveled to two of the most productive agricultural regions in the entire country: Ontario's Greenbelt and British Columbia's Fraser Valley -- to talk to farmers, policy makers, food activists and academics. Our journeys landed us in a hundred-thousand-dollar combine, a Mennonite produce auction, took us into the egg industry in Abbotsford and Vancouver's urban farms.

Sprouting questions

Along the way, we sensed first hand not only the challenges holding back local food systems, but also the dynamic cultural shift that offers hope for those dedicated to making sustainable local food flourish. It's a shift away from the industrialized food system and

towards good taste, pride in place and renewed appreciation for the people who provide what is essential for human life.

Consider: farmers' markets are growing at a national rate of 30 per cent a year, pumping \$3.1 billion dollars into local economies. Just recently, Wal-Mart announced a Heritage program aimed at putting more regionally produced fruits and vegetables on its shelves. When the largest corporate food distributor in the country starts talking about the marketing potential and fuel saving that comes with sourcing local food, you know you've got a mass movement on your hands.

People are hungry for change. But the reality is that consumer demand alone won't create the kind of food system we want. What will it take? What are the ingredients of truly local, sustainable and equitable food systems? These are the questions that we seek to answer with this series produced by [The Tyee Solutions Society](#).

In pursuing our reporting, we found reason to be optimistic. We heard from older, traditional farmers who are experimenting with organic methods, renewable energy and co-operative business models. We met young farmers, like Eric Rosenkrantz in Brampton, ON, who is making a living on roughly four acres and who calls urban farming "an up-and-coming industry." Or new farmers, like Bob Baloch, an immigrant from Pakistan who left his stressful job in IT to become a farmer and used his tech skills to create a farm planning software program.

We learned that, while farmers must innovate and adapt, so too must the distribution networks that will bring their food to urban markets. Warehouses, coolers, packing houses and processors have all moved south to where labour is cheaper, but there are efforts to bring it back -- and good reason to. Agriculture has the highest economic multiplier effect of any industry. One B.C. report indicated that a single buy local campaign was estimated to have created 1,900 jobs in food and food processing over a three-year period.

In Vancouver, a group of farmers and food activists is attempting to bring back some of this infrastructure with the New City Market. Amy Robertson, chair of the [Vancouver Farmers' Market Association](#) says such a food hub, which would include permanent farmers' market stalls, cooler and freezer space and a commercial kitchen, could serve as an incubator for local food processing businesses.

Highlighting levers for change

We heard that local governments and public institutions have tremendous power and leverage points to respond to the needs of their communities and push forward the local food agenda.

[Local Food Plus](#) is one non-profit that is working with municipalities and universities to create local, sustainable food procurement policies, for example. With its help, the City of Markham, ON, became the first municipality in Canada to require a percentage of local and sustainable food in its operations, and one residence at the University of Toronto is now purchasing 22 per cent of its food from local growers.

"These institutions are spending millions of dollars on food every year," said Local Food Plus executive director Lori Stahlbrand. "We write the language that goes into the requests for proposals for food service contracts. It helps to scale up the whole system, it helps to educate the public through these institutions, it's a part of how these institutions can meet their climate change requirements."

From the non-profit sector, we heard about new efforts to democratize local food, making healthy choices available to all.

[The Stop Community Food Centre](#) was one of Toronto's original food banks. Now it's gone beyond the food bank model to bring affordable farmers' markets, cooking classes, gardens and greenhouses to its low-income members. "The immutable truth," says The Stop's program director, Kathryn Scharff, "is that low-income people don't have money to spend on

food, and that local sustainable food costs more. We are trying to bridge that gap.”

‘Growing food is a labour of love’

Most of all, we heard over and over that public support for local food and local farmers must be backed up by a cultural shift that places greater value on food. With the demand for local food must come a willingness to pay a premium for it.

“I really hope that we can change the food system before we lose our farmers,” said Jenn Pfenning, an organic farmer near Waterloo, Ontario. “Growing food is a labour of love for most of us. We have to learn as a society to value and protect that. People have to understand that \$10.25 an hour minimum wage means their potatoes have to cost more, they have to. The true cost of production has to be paid.”

The local food movement is really a collection of local food movements, based on the unique needs and attributes of the communities in which they grow. The solutions we look at in the series might seem modest, but they are first steps, and important ones.

Because sooner or later, as the price of fuel increases, the real costs of importing cheaply produced food from thousands of miles away will be realized. Sooner or later, a shifting climate might make production in places like California or Mexico impossible. The question is, what will be left for us by then?

Please visit *The Tyee* in the coming weeks to read the unfolding answers. You’ll meet Dave Ferguson, a cash cropper who is investing in solar, Jenn and Ekk Pfenning, farmers and local food activists in Waterloo, ON, rogue organic egg producer Karl Hann from Abbotsford, BC, and Ian Walker, a man on a mission to create a local canned tomato in B.C.

The Little Local Food Connector That Could

How Home Grow-In plays a key role by helping nearby farmers find Vancouver customers.

By Colleen Kimmett,

Originally published on October 28, 2010,

<http://thetyee.ca/News/2010/10/28/LocalFoodConnector/>

Deb Reynolds knows the grind of the farmers' market circuit. She used to drive from Cawston to Vancouver four times a week to hit different markets around the city. The draw? A customer base willing to pay a good price for her organic fruits and vegetables. The drawbacks? A five-hour drive each way, early mornings, late nights and too much time away from the field.

While Reynolds knows that farmers' markets are an important outlet for people who want to buy local, she also knows they can be a pain in the ass for farmers.

She has since left the farm, but her experience gave her unique insight into how she could support farmers while meeting urban demand for local food. Reynolds has been the catalyst for a new co-operative venture called the [Home Grow-In Market Collective](#), a place that offers the ethos of a farmers' market with the convenience of a retail store.

Small, specialized distributor outlets like Reynolds' likely will have to multiply if local food economies are to thrive.

Although farmers' markets are growing in size and number across Canada -- one report found they generated sales of \$1.03 billion in 2009 -- they aren't an ideal alternative. Limited hours and locations prevent some shoppers from reaching them, and as Reynolds found, they are a huge time commitment for farmers themselves.



“What I’m trying to do with my growers,” says Reynolds, “is bring a market to them, rather than them having to go to the market. I want to show there is a market for their produce seven days a week, 52 weeks of the year.”

The Home Grow-In Collective Market is already the distribution centre for the Reynolds' buyers' co-op. The growers who contribute to the co-op, seven in total, agreed to use part of the members' fee to pay rent on the space. At the end of this month, the market will open to the general public. Fourteen vendors in total will have space there and will share the costs of utilities and staffing. Everyone involved had to contribute to about \$100,000 worth of renovations, says Reynolds.

“This way, they don’t have to be there -- they can get 100 per cent of the profit while paying a fraction of the operating costs,” she says. “We’re trying to prove to the world that a community of small businesses can get together for the benefit of all of us.”

Started as neighbourhood grocer

The idea spun off from a store Reynolds opened in April 2009, called the Home Grow-In Grocer. It’s a tiny shop on the corner of a quiet residential Vancouver street. On the day it opened, Good Friday, Reynolds had \$2,100 worth of produce spread out on a couple of picnic tables. She sold out in two hours.

Her mission with the store has always been to support local farmers. All 41 suppliers are B.C. companies, and she says 90 per cent of the food she sells comes from within a 100 mile radius. Within months of opening, Reynolds launched a buying club -- the Home Grow-In buyers’ co-op -- working with existing suppliers, her shop employees and many of her existing customers.

The co-op is similar to a Community Supported Agriculture program in that members buy shares of a farmer’s harvest in the spring, and then receive produce boxes throughout the growing season. It’s different in that it works with seven different producers and is staffed by Home Grow-In employees. She has two employees working full-time bringing produce from the Okanagan and Similkameen Valleys, and other suppliers bring it in themselves. All of the produce goes to Reynold’s warehouse in Surrey, where it’s washed and packed and then trucked into the store.

This summer, shares cost \$250 to \$600, depending on size, and the yield was a box of produce per week from June to September. The arrangement seemed to work well for all parties -- knowing they had a guaranteed market, growers could plan their season better, and members had easy access to local, fresh produce. All proceeds went to farmers to cover the cost of production, harvest and transportation. In it’s first season, it was extremely successful, selling 200 shares.

Mecca for local food lovers

The Tyee visited Home Grow-In on one of the last days it hosted the co-op box pickup for the season. It’s easy to see why they need more space. On this warm afternoon in early fall, the shop is a hive of activity on a usually quiet residential street.

Stacks of Tupperware totes filled with fruits and vegetables are arranged on the narrow strip of grass between the road and sidewalk. Employees skirt around them, filling boxes for the members, who are milling around with carts, bikes and strollers. Store manager Jennifer Sweeney makes the rounds with a plate of fresh cantaloupe (“You’ve got to try this,” she exclaims), and co-op manager Alannah MacLennan is signing up members for next season’s winter produce box and meat box.

Meanwhile Reynolds circulates like a good host at her own party, greeting regulars by name and handing out ice cream cones to their kids. Robert Commandur, an organic apple and pear grower from the Okanagan, hovers nearby, waiting to catch her attention. He has driven down to check out the store and its clientele, and to talk to Reynolds about becoming a supplier.

“Prices with conventional systems are really bottoming out,” he explains. Afterwards, he says he is optimistic that supplying the co-op would be good for his business. “I’ll get a price I know I can live on and support the farm,” he says.

At the co-op table, Marcella Paolli is loading the goods into her bike pannier. She says she joined because she wants to support B.C. farmers and teach her kids about where food comes from. Since the farmers’ market at Nat Bailey stadium moved, “it’s not really convenient for me,” she says. The co-op is now the most convenient way for her to get fresh, local produce.

Mark Macutcheon, who is signing up for the winter produce box, says he and his wife also stopped going to the market regularly when it moved.

“We didn’t want to drive, it was kind of defeating the purpose. We’d been going to the [Home Grow-In] grocery anyway, and when we saw the box we thought it was a pretty good idea, to support local farms and agriculture. And we’re happy.”

Using the success of the first season as leverage, Reynolds convinced her suppliers to pitch in on a larger home base for the co-op program. This fall, the co-op began distributing its winter produce and meat boxes from the Market, a larger space located on Cambie Street.

Everyone pitching in

Reynolds says the new market space will bring a sense of permanence and credibility to the co-op box program, but will also help some of the farmers supplying the box program.

“We needed a home for the co-op boxes,” says Reynolds. “But we’re also working with people who have stretched themselves thin doing farmers’ markets. They can’t afford to put in a storefront on their own.”

Jerry Gelderman of [Gelderman Farms](#), for example, is providing pork for the winter meat box, but will also have a permanent freezer at the Cambie market. Gelderman says that while there is an advantage to going the farmers’ market route, it’s a lot of extra work.

“Once we started, we realized the commitment that every other store puts in to be there,” he says. “It’s huge.”

He says working with Reynolds has been a very positive experience. “People seem to be responding really well to her and what’s she’s doing.”

Ron Tamis of [RonDriso Farms](#) is one of the main suppliers for both the store and the food box program. He operates a 70-acre farm in Surrey, right next door to the Home Grow-In warehouse, that is part of a parcel of land that his father bought in 1958. Though he’s always worked in agriculture, doing crop management

and custom operations for larger farms, only in the past five years has he been farming his own property full time. He produces vegetables -- sweet corn, potatoes, carrots, onions and beets, to name a few -- as well as beef and poultry.

He and his wife run a store out of their farm, sell every Wednesday at the [Surrey Farmers’ Market](#), and also earn revenue off their pumpkin patch, which is open to school groups during the week and to the general public on weekends. Each year, his crop variety and volume has grown a little bit -- this year, he went from growing 500 to 3,500 feet of carrots. He acknowledges that he’s a rare thing in today’s world, where the small family farm is quickly disappearing, and says that a large part of his success is due to his relationship with Home Grow-In.

‘You can count on orders’

“I’m shipping a lot more product,” he says. “It allows me to concentrate more in the field. Deb reaches that target market that is specific to the type of farming that I’m doing. When you have a box system, you can count on a weekly basis that there are orders there.”

It’s a reciprocal relationship. Tamis and Reynolds have staff that float between the two operations. Sometimes Tamis will help Reynolds bunch carrots for the boxes, for example, or sometimes he will pay the wages of her staff to help at harvest time.

“We do everything by hand,” he says. “The labour requirements that we have are way higher than what a commercial farm has.”

Could the Home Grow-In model be duplicated elsewhere?

“One of the things that Deb has in spades is the go-to-it-ness, just do it,” says co-op manager MacLennan. While Reynolds is focused on the co-operative spirit of all the parties involved in the Market Collective, the former thoracic surgery nurse downplays her own role as a dedicated and effective organizer. She is also someone who believes so much in the cause

-- the viability of B.C. farmers -- that she is known to offer suppliers more than they ask for their products. Reynolds is the exception rather than the norm when it comes to setting price. As Gelderman puts it, "we are basically at the mercy of our retailers."

"We do not make money on the produce," Reynolds says. "Even retail. I make my money selling the milk, the eggs, the honey, the pickles and the other stuff in there." Reynolds acknowledges that she's able to sell at a premium because of the area of Vancouver she's in. "What my customers will bear is comfortable for them," she says.

Tamis, for his part, says that this system is working for him and thinks it could be duplicated elsewhere. "It's all on market demand," he says. "And I do believe it is a growing trend. We see an increase in business with our store. As long as the cheques keep coming in, then you have a guaranteed income.

"It's a light at the end of the tunnel."

How Mennonites Are Modernizing a Local Food Economy

*Volume, variety, reliability.
Welcome to the Elmira Produce Auction Co-operative.*

By Colleen Kimmett,
Originally published on October 28, 2010,
<http://thetyee.ca/News/2010/10/28/MennonitesModernize/>

This story was also republished in its entirety in the [Waterloo Region Record](#).

It would seem at first glance, driving down Highway 22 in Woolwich County, Ontario, that the family farm is alive and well. The two-lane rural road is flanked by tall corn fields, large barns and well-kept houses. Produce stands appear at regular intervals at the end of long laneways, advertising sweet corn, carrots, pies, blueberries, pickles. At the bottom of each, a notice to customers: No Sunday Sales.

Sunday is still a day of rest for the Old Order Mennonites who live in the area, and farming is still a way of life. But while the old traditions remain (some farmers use tractors, but no other motorized vehicles) global forces have changed things. When the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or “mad cow disease”) crisis led to an international trade ban on Canadian beef, many in this large beef-producing region were hit hard. Looking closer at the large livestock barns in the distance, it’s possible to see that many are actually empty.

Farmers were forced to diversify into fruit and vegetable production. In order to help them reach new markets, the community launched a unique initiative called the [Elmira Produce Auction Co-operative](#).

EPAC opened in 2004 and has been growing steadily since. It now has approximately 100 members, and



serves as one-stop shopping for larger retail buyers in the region who want to serve a growing demand for local food, but don’t have the time to deal with farmers individually.

It’s been lauded as a way to break down one of the greatest barriers that small-scale farmers face in getting their produce to consumers: supplying large enough volumes, in one place, to attract retail and restaurant buyers.

Delivery vehicles with horse power

Teams of horses stand patiently in the parking lot of the Elmira Produce Auction Co-operative, or EPAC, on a grey fall morning. They’ve traveled from Men-

nonite farms from around the region, bringing loads of just-picked fruits and vegetables. One of the rules of the auction is that all the produce has to come from within a 75-mile radius.

Inside the auction warehouse, the bidding has just begun. Auctioneer Bill Horst walks up and down rows of wooden pallets, which are piled with boxes of carrots, onions, apples, kale and dozens of other varieties of fruits and vegetables. He's followed by a cluster of people, mostly men, many of whom are dressed in the Old Order Mennonite tradition: black hats, black shoes, black pants and white shirts. Horst spends less than a minute on average at each lot, prices rolling off his tongue as buyers make their bids.

Doug Pagett, manager of the local Foodland grocery store, stands outside the immediate circle of bidders, consulting a clipboard. He comes here regularly to buy for the store. Although Foodland is owned by Sobeys and required to carry certain Sobeys brands, there is leeway in his franchise agreement to buy fresh produce from local suppliers. "I have seen more demand for local," Pagett says. "Big time. And this is all good quality -- consistently good quality -- produce."

On the other side of the floor, Heather Kelly, marketing coordinator for the University of Waterloo, is chatting with a colleague. They come here each week to buy produce for an on-campus farmers' market. Administration takes care of the buying, transportation and storage, and then the students take over. "They put everything up, service the customers, handle the cash. It's amazing, the number of student volunteers that are willing to get up at 7:00 in the morning."

Coming to the auction is her favourite part of the job. "I love feeling that connected to our local community," Kelly exclaims. "It's beautiful, the colours of the fruits and vegetables, the smell, all the noise and action going around."

'They have come leaps and bounds'

EPAC rules dictate that members have to pay 10 per cent of all sales to help cover overhead costs, and

buyers must purchase three or more boxes of produce. Since opening in 2004, sales have increased 600 per cent, and last year the warehouse was expanded to handle more volume.

One of the early challenges was trying to achieve product and packaging consistency. EPAC now offers its members standard boxes with the auction's logo, and holds grower education sessions on harvesting, washing and packing techniques early each season.

"They have come leaps and bounds," says Peter Katona, the executive director of FoodLink Ontario, a non-profit that promotes local food, farms and businesses in the Waterloo region. "I think the biggest thing they've learned is to be more consistent on the grading and the quality. The quality is really unsurpassed."

However, he's uncertain if the auction would work outside this tight-knit community. "The perception of some non-Mennonite wholesale producers around here, is that Mennonites don't need the same price because labour price and costs of production may be lower."

Another challenge of the auction model, Mennonite or not, is that buyers don't know what will be available on any given day. "If you are a larger buyer coming in from Toronto, you want to know that you can get what you need at the price that you want it at, all the time," Katona says. "This is possibly one of the biggest challenges."

This is pronounced, he says, by the fact that the unique protocol here means information about what's available on any given day isn't quickly disseminated to buyers. The EPAC office has a phone, but no computers, no Internet, no email. Instead, women in long dresses and white bonnets file index cards on which auction results are listed: who bought what, how much, and for what price.

Nevertheless, auction manager Noah Gingrich says that farmers in the region are now growing 10 times more produce than they were five years ago. A Water-

loo Region campaign called Buy Local! Buy Fresh! has been helpful in promoting local food. “With the wholesale market like this, it just makes more sense for more people to get interested in doing it.”

Gingrich, who himself has five tonnes of potatoes up for auction today, chuckles and shrugs when asked how much he expects to fetch for them.

“It’s just a live auction. Like, if there’s surplus of something and no buying power, then it goes that way,” he says, pointing his thumb down at the floor. “And if there’s lots of buying power,” he says, jerking his thumb up, “then it goes the other way.”

A fair price for all?

Back on the floor, Marvin Martin follows the crowd with his young daughter in tow, waiting for the auctioneer to get to his case of Savoy cabbage. He, his wife and five children live on a four-acre farm not far from here, and in addition to selling here, he operates a produce stand on their property. He’s hoping to get somewhere between 60 cents and a dollar per head for the cabbage, but has the same wait-and-see attitude about the outcome. “It’s supply and demand,” he says with a shrug. “You always get a fair price.”

A hand-printed poster taped on the wall outside the auction office says as much: “A fair price for both buyer and seller. Artificially high prices discourage the buyers. Artificially low prices discourage the growers. Let’s strive for a healthy price for all!”

But the flux of the free market does impact EPAC -- a flood of California strawberries on the market, for example, can cause the price of a flat sold here to drop as much as \$10 in a matter of days -- and some say the lowest-bidder model does not result in a fair price for the farmer.

Last year, Nelson Wideman, one of the founders of EPAC and former auction manager, split to create his own wholesale produce operation, called Jay West Wholesale. The move was divisive in this tight-knit community.

“I guess I lost confidence in using a live auction to establish price in the auction,” Wideman says. “The auction method works wonderful if there’s something in high demand or short supply, which is usually at the same time. Or if something is of uncertain value, like antiques for instance.

“But with the produce, if we had ample supply and the buyer of course learns this... there’s really no point in bidding against another buyer, because there’s five more piles down the line. And I guess I was so fed up to the extent that I decided to withdraw from the auction and start my own wholesale business using another method.”

At Jay West Wholesale, Wideman sets prices that are based on the going rates at the Ontario Food Terminal, the largest distributor in the province. At the beginning of the week, Wideman sends out a list of the produce he expects to receive, along with the price, and then buyers send him their orders. This system eliminates the uncertainty about variety, volumes and price that buyers face at the produce auction.

Wideman acknowledges that there are strong feelings in the community about his business. “They’re afraid it will undermine what the auction is doing, but I’m hoping it will supplement what the auction is doing,” Wideman says. “If something shows up on Wednesday that’s not on my list, there’s bound to be someone at the auction who wants it,” he says.

Although his first year was a challenging one, Wideman says he believes there is potential, especially if the demand for local food keeps up, and if his community can work together to make both methods of wholesale complement one another. “I think it’s just a matter of keeping on a little longer with the auction and with the Jay West venture here,” he says.

“I’d say anything is possible elsewhere if it’s possible in the Mennonite community. What does it take? It takes absolute dedication from the whole community, really.”

In Vancouver, a ‘Crown Jewel’ of Local Food Is in the Works

Here comes the New City Market, reviving this city’s historic ‘food hub’ of a century ago.

By Jeff Nield,

Originally published on November 4, 2010,

<http://thetyee.ca/News/2010/11/04/LocalFoodCrownJewel/>

If you found yourself on the southern shore of False Creek at Westminster Avenue (now Main Street) on Saturday, Aug. 15, 1908 you would happen by opening day of Vancouver’s City Market. The grand building with dual bell towers and a generous waterfront promenade is plastered with signs advertising retail and wholesale “farm products” for sale and a restaurant serving “meals at all hours.” Rail tracks in the foreground illustrate the prime mode of transportation bringing food from the Fraser Valley to be sold at the market. The Mt. Pleasant marching band posing in full regalia is a testament to the community celebration accompanying opening day.

Could B.C.’s biggest city today bring back to life so vibrant a public space, building a key component in what could be one of North America’s most robust local food economies?

Tara McDonald is one of a number of people working on just that vision. “There are parts of the food system, right in the centre of the value chain, between the producer and the consumer that need to be fixed,” says McDonald, Vancouver Farmers’ Markets executive director.

On one end, we have 20,000 mostly small and diverse farms. On the other, we have retailers, restaurants and individual consumers willing to purchase any and all locally produced food they can get their hands on. But unless the consumer (for these purposes “consumer” includes retailers and restaurateurs) is part of the small percentage of us with the time, knowledge and



dedication to seek out individual farmers, finding local food can be a mysterious and uncertain quest.

In 2006 McDonald realized that the demand for local food was quickly outstripping supply. The success of the [100-Mile Diet](#) experiment, the publication of Michael Pollan’s hugely influential *Omnivore’s Dilemma* and a handful of successful documentaries focused on the food system had made “local” the new “organic.”

In very short order Vancouver’s Farmers’ Markets went from a one location, weekly community gathering running from May to October to a five-location,

year-round economic powerhouse, pumping \$10 million into the local economy last year, including \$4.1 million in direct sales.

This rapid growth demonstrated the public's demand for local food and spurred the Farmers' Market Society to seek partnerships with other organizations to bring more local food into the city. "We couldn't do it on our own," says McDonald.

Enter Local Food First and the Food Hub

McDonald didn't have to search for long, finding willing partners already working to the same goals from other parts of the food system. In short order individuals, including myself, from the non-profit, business and academic communities formed Local Food First with the singular goal being to increase local food production and consumption in order to increase local ownership and control of our food system. The obvious first project was the development of a local food hub for Vancouver.

Food hubs are popping up all across North America to address multiple specific needs for the communities where they sit. The Stop in Toronto features a 3,000 square foot greenhouse, café and farmers' market; the food hub in Athens, Ohio facilitated the re-emergence of a local industry around the wild fruit pawpaw; and the newly proposed permanent farmers' market in the Comox Valley, situated along one of the most traveled thoroughfares in the region, will include wildlife interpretation to celebrate the unique trumpeter swan habitat that borders the property.

Which brings us back to that faded snapshot of City Market. In Vancouver, in recognition of the city's century old tradition, a local food hub is taking shape, and McDonald and others working on the project have a name for it: New City Market.

New City Market

New City Market will fill the hole in the centre of our local food system by consolidating production and consolidating consumption. "It's going to be a

place where multiple forms of direct marketing can happen," explains McDonald. "So, that's farmers' markets plus producer to buyer direct sales, and those buyers could be processors, retailers, restaurants or institutions." Although the design is unconfirmed, the focal point will be a central open space, accessible to farmers who will roll open one of the access doors, back their farm truck up to their stall and set up shop for the day. Around the periphery and on the second floor of the (hoped for) LEED Platinum certified facility, will be processing and teaching kitchens, temperature specific storage and office space.

"If this facility is going to do its job right, it's going to meet the needs that exist between the producer and consumer or buyer," explains McDonald. "We shouldn't be creating any redundancies in the system." Right now the historical centre of Vancouver's produce industry is Malkin Avenue, also known as Produce Row. The distribution houses on Produce Row have, for almost a century, done a great job of keeping Vancouver, and all points east, fed. They have sourced and sold all that the global food system has to offer.

The main difference with New City Market is that it's the whole local food system in one building. Traditional produce distributors move cases of product from far off (and sometimes close to home if the volume is adequate) farmers to local end users. New City Market offers local farmers and processors access directly to their markets, which may include distributors on Produce Row. For those farmers that are looking for a better return for their crop, direct market access is the way to go.

When told of the idea of New City Market by McDonald, one of the farmers' market vendors, an Okanagan orchardist, repeated the idea back in her own words. "You mean that I could come down to the New City Market and in the morning when the farmers' market is on I can sell my produce directly to the consumer and then the next door, or prior to the market that morning, I could sell to some chefs and grocers and then whatever I don't sell I can sell off to processing for jams or whatever, and I can leave with

an empty truck?” A farmer returning from market with an empty truck is a happy farmer.

The next big step in developing the project is securing a site. “We’re really focusing on the False Creek Flats area,” says McDonald. Along with the historical connection with the 1908 market, the area is centrally located, has easy cross-town access and, perhaps most importantly, it is underdeveloped. “The area is sort of the last frontier to be developed within proximity to the downtown core,” explains McDonald. Although Local Food First has been approached by a number of interested land owners and developers, the most likely scenario will see the New City Market developed on City of Vancouver-owned land.

A key ingredient for a green city

Deputy city manager Sadhu Johnston says the New City Market will be “the crown jewel” of the local food system for Vancouver.

Stopping short of offering official City Hall support just yet, Johnston says the facility will support a number of goals in the city’s Greenest City Action Plan. (The city hopes the successful implementation of the GCAP will make Vancouver the greenest city in the world by 2020.) “Over 25% of an individual’s carbon footprint is related to food,” he said when reached by phone from Chicago. He goes on to acknowledge that the city recognizes the strong need for an urban distribution centre for local food as well as an incubation centre for the development of value added products.

A consortium of foundations have stepped forward to fund the ongoing planning of the facility. The specific governance structure is still undetermined, but given the number of possible tenants and stakeholders, structuring as a new generation co-operative is the leading model. “While this is receiving tremendous amounts of support, it’s still a business,” says [Local Food First](#) steering team member and SFU associate Herb Barbolet. “It’s not a popularity contest.” Nine of the 10 “ingredients for a healthy local food economy” identified by the expert panel and the public at a recent Tyee-sponsored forum at the [Museum of Vancouver](#) will either be directly addressed or supported by the New City Market and its proposed functions.

(Alas, the facility will not be able to rebuild the social safety net.)

“This will be a fabulous project and we’re among the leaders in North America moving towards this,” says Barbolet. “It’s a critical component of a green city.”

Better Than a Food Bank

The Stop in Toronto has evolved into a dignified model connecting local producers with low-income eaters.

By Colleen Kimmett,
Originally published on November 5, 2010,
<http://thetyee.ca/News/2010/11/05/BetterThanAFoodBank/>

It's the lunch rush at **The Stop**, and chef Scott MacNeil is cursing the scalloped potatoes.

He calls out to the servers -- "You gotta wait five minutes!" -- standing on the other side of the kitchen's swinging door with half-filled plates. As MacNeil prepares another huge baking pan for the oven he fields questions from a group of nine food bank directors and employees.

"How's the day going?" asks one of the visitors, flattened against a stainless steel counter in the crowded kitchen.

"Busy," he replies. He is a few volunteers short today, and his attempt to pull off a quick batch of creamy, cheesy spuds didn't turn out well. "That's the last time I'll try that," he says. "Takes way too long." Someone else wonders why there is plated service here, instead of having everybody line up. "It's the most efficient," MacNeil says (the lunch rush is typically 200 people over the course of an hour and a half). "Plus, we don't do lineups because we want to foster a sense of dignity here."

More than just a hand-out

When The Stop Community Food Centre first opened its doors in Toronto's Davenport West neighbourhood in the early '70s, it was one of the first food banks in the entire city. Over the past 11 years it's grown to be something much more. Along with the emergency



food bank service -- a three-day supply of food, twice a month -- members can drop in for a meal four days a week, grow their own vegetables in a community garden, buy discounted produce at a weekly farmers' market, or take cooking classes.

While The Stop is rooted in providing food to those who can't afford it, it works on the premise that without food infrastructure, viable farms, civic engagement and personal empowerment, food banks are simply a stop-gap measure in the fight to eradicate hunger.

The organization's ability to harness a growing interest in local food has allowed them to not only boost their own programming, but also build local food infrastructure. The model is the envy of foodies and

social activists alike, and a case study for municipalities in Ontario and beyond.

Which is why four groups like this one, from the North York Harvest food bank, show up weekly to see how it's done. North York Harvest is the largest food bank in the city, serving approximately 11,000 people per month through 60 neighbourhood centres. Nationwide food bank use increased 17.5 per cent in 2009, compared to the year before. Approximately 800,000 people used a food bank last year, many for the first time.

"We don't see the need for food banks ending in the near future," says The Stop's program director, Kathryn Scharf. "But what we are trying to do here is create a tiny microcosm of a food system."

'It allows us to connect with each other'

A secure food system is defined broadly as one in which everyone has access to healthy, sustainable food all of the time. Organizations working on food security tend to veer off in two directions, working on either the access part, or the sustainability part, often leading to a tense division depending on who you prioritize, says Scharf.

The Stop's flagship building, located on the first floor of a plain brick low-rent apartment tower, houses its low-income programming and The Stop's administrative offices. Here, the primary goal is access -- feeding hungry people.

In the dining room, where the tour group gets to sample the lunch (scalloped potatoes -- which turned out great -- mixed green salad, and a swiss chard, butter-nut squash, leek and sausage stir-fry) dozens of flags hang from the ceiling, representing the diversity of its members. On the walls are posters advertising prenatal health classes and The Stop's popular Wednesday pizza night, featuring homemade pies baked in a wood-fired oven outside. There's also a digital counter, deli-style, so people can have a meal while they wait for their number to come up at the food bank.

Through the dining room doors is the foyer where donated food is handed out. Monday is usually a busy day, says volunteer Sherifa Elkdaen, because they have to unload donations as well as fill orders. Like many of the volunteers, she is also a member. "As a team, we do a tremendous amount for the community, through advocacy and the community centre," she says. "It allows us to connect with each other."

Inside the food bank's dry storage room, there is a random assortment of unperishables: crackers, boxes of mac and cheese, baby food, and six-pound tins of Wendy's brand crushed tomatoes. But there's also always featured fresh produce; this month they have tomatillos and corn from one of The Stop's community gardens. They run two community gardens, Earls court and Hillcrest, and also get free or low-cost food for its programs through its new satellite site, The Green Barn.

The Green Barn an oasis for foodies

This site represents the other side of the division that Scharf talked about -- the sustainability side.

Located just a 10-minute drive from The Stop, in Toronto's midtown, the Green Barn is located in a real barn -- though it's one that once held streetcars, not cows. It's part of the the Wychwood Barn development, which opened in 2008 as a mixed housing, artists' studio and office space. It's a beautiful building, with high, vaulted ceilings, lots of glass and heavy wood beams. The Stop's share of the space here includes an office, as well as a greenhouse, sheltered garden, community kitchen and year-round, covered farmers' market.

In the summer, it features vendors with mostly organic produce; in the winter, artisan products like chocolate and cheeses dominate. Scharf acknowledges that it's a high-end market, out of reach of the Davenport community.

"But it provides a valuable role supporting farmers and it certainly builds that kind of community around there," she points out. "Because we have a connec-

tion with our high-end market, we can get food that, at the end of the day, farmers... wouldn't be able to save long enough to sell at another market.

"We also try to buy from them as well, so with the food that's donated, we make a little bit of money here, and then we channel it back."

Inside the greenhouse, volunteers are harvesting herbs. The warm glass building is fragrant with the smell of sage, thyme and basil, which will be used this week for the Green Barn's annual What's On The Table event, a \$50 per plate fundraising dinner. Another \$200 buys a spot in chef Chris Brown's kitchen to help prepare the meal and get a cooking lesson at the same time.

"It rubs people sometimes the wrong way when we have high-end functions," says Scharf. "But our What's on the Table event raises over \$200,000 in one night. I'm pretty comfortable with that. We get to spend the money the rest of the year and no one's demanding Excel spreadsheets that are 50 pages long."

Farmers need to eat, too

Another successful fundraising initiative is Grow for The Stop. Instead of donating directly to The Stop itself, the money goes to a nearby farm (The New Farm in Creemore) to subsidize the production of fresh fruits and vegetables that are delivered to The Stop's food bank and lunch program.

"The Stop has become our single biggest customer," says Brent Preston, who runs the farm with his wife Gillian Flies.

"When we started out, we realized almost all our food was going to really wealthy people... either at farmers' markets or to some really high-end restaurants in Toronto," says Preston. "We really wanted to figure out ways to make our food more accessible, but at the same time be able to make a living. We thought this would be a good way to do it."

The Stop raises 90 per cent of its \$2.9 million operating budget from private donations. This kind of no-

strings-attached money is a blessing for a non-profit organization.

The increasing popularity of local food, and the fact that The Stop has such a variety of programming to appeal to so many people -- those interested in supporting farmers, in social justice, in food access, in democratizing the slow food movement -- have found a place in The Stop. It means that they are able to leverage all this money in one well-organized, well-staffed location.

"Very little of what we do is totally unique to The Stop," says Scharf. "As much as anything, what we're really doing is a funding model. We benefit from the critical mass of having all these programs based in one location."

Growing across the province

The Stop is now looking to replicate itself in other communities across Ontario, and hopefully, the country. Scharf is hesitant to give details at this point, but says there has been interest from other municipalities and funders. The goal is to work with existing programs and people and create a more coordinated hub for these services -- essentially, to institutionalize food work that's already being done "with a place and a sign on the door," says Scharf. "Aiming high, for big money. Not just \$1,000 to a garden for some shovels... but actually having staff to support the work."

Scharf is uncertain whether the philanthropic interest in local food issues will last. "I think we need large-scale government investment before we replicate massively, because I think there will be a built-in limit to how much private money we can raise," she says. "The scale of the solution has to match the scale of the problem."

Packed With Opportunities

How small farmers are turning their crops into tasty products without relying on the big global processors.

By Colleen Kimmitt

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<http://thetyee.ca/News/2010/11/11/PackedWithOpportunities/>

Six years ago, the Pfenningss, who had been farming organically in the Waterloo, ON, area for three decades, found themselves squeezed out of their own market.

Their relationship with an organic food wholesaler was, as Jenn Pfenning describes it, “limping along like a bad marriage.” They felt the wholesaler, which was able to buy California lettuce and carrots cheaper, was pitting growers against each other to get a lower price.

“At one point they said, ‘Sell us your lettuce for eight dollars a box or we don’t take it,’” recalls Pfenning over coffee outside the farm’s warehouse and office. “We ended up having to disc it in... you take the disc and just plow it down.” In other words, the field of organic lettuce they worked so hard to grow wasn’t worth the cost of harvesting it.

“It’s gut-wrenching to do that, horrible, absolutely horrible,” she says. “It makes you feel like you’re going to throw up.”

It was the last straw, and the Pfenningss decided they had to do or die. They took out a substantial bank loan to invest in new infrastructure at the farm: a larger packing warehouse, several cold storage units, a new shipping dock and delivery trucks.

They formed relationships with other small organic growers and diversified their customer base. Though



they eventually lost the wholesale contract, they soon had other retailers knocking down their door.

“It was like, you know, a rollercoaster, when you’re ratcheting up, up, up the hill,” she says. “And we kept expecting that at some point it was going to go down, and it hasn’t.”

Now Pfenningss is the only organic grower/packer, wholesaler and distributor in the region. Their story represents both the opportunities and the barriers to a strong local food economy. Certainly a lot of farmers in British Columbia’s Fraser Valley would nod in recognition at what the Pfenningss have faced.

Demand for local is growing, but just as family farms have disappeared across the country, so has the infrastructure to support them.

Processing disappears with the family farm

For farmers like the Pfenning, simply having the facilities for washing, packing and cold storage can extend the shelf life of their produce. When the price of broccoli can fluctuate from \$5 to \$50 per case from week to week, this makes a huge difference, says Jenn, whose mother- and father-in-law started this farm after immigrating from Germany in 1981. However, these facilities are also expensive. She didn't want to say exactly how much they spent on the upgrades, only that it cost in the order of several million dollars.

And with the farm's expansion came higher labour and overhead costs. Their staff went from 10 to 14 people year round to 35 to 40, peaking in the summer at around 120, says Pfenning.

"I mean, there are times I wish we could go back to being small," Pfenning says laughing, "because you lose the intimacy and you know, sort of the atmosphere changes, it has to with more people. We all used to have lunch together in one of our houses, but it doesn't work with a hundred odd people."

Their warehouse crews include locals who have worked in agriculture all their lives, refugees who have trouble finding work with their language skills, and students who return home each summer. All start at minimum wage, now \$10.25 in Ontario.

"People have to understand that \$10.25 an hour minimum wage means that their potatoes have to cost more, they have to," says Pfenning. "The true cost of production has to be paid."

They decline to disclose the farm revenues, but said that the line between a good year and a bad year is slim. "At the end of the day, we're lucky if we get to keep one per cent, after we cover all of our costs. That's a good year," says Wolfgang Pfenning, Jenn's brother-in-law. "Last year we were at a loss. We had a lot of customers go bankrupt."

But having a wide array of customers -- many legs to stand on, says Wolfgang -- has made it possible to survive. "As far as I remember," he says, "every single business relationship came our way by referral. What do you do in life to be referred? It's like farming, you plant seeds. Not all seeds that you plant will sprout, and you have to nurse it for a long time, but eventually you harvest a little bit."

But when the Pfenning wanted to further extend their harvest with a new facility that would let them market their produce in frozen form, they found it was financially out of reach.

The plant they envisioned would do everything from washing and chopping to blanching and freezing. "We found it would cost somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$7 million to \$10 million," said Jenn. "That's not a huge size of plant that would compete with Green Giant or anything. That's the amount of cash that you would have to come up with to start anything."

In southern Ontario, [Naturally Norfolk Inc.](#) received \$1 million from the provincial government's Rural Economic Development Fund to build a new 65,000 square foot processing facility. The facility, which will cost \$6 million altogether, will expand the services the company already provides -- drying, pureeing, extraction and freezing -- with new quick-freeze technology. Naturally Norfolk president Jim Irvin said the facility will help local farmers increase production, and extend their harvest to reach a wider market.

Several high-profile closures in the past few years have highlighted a demand for government investment in processing. The 2008 closure of the CanGro canning facility in Niagara raised a storm of protest from the community and calls for the province to step in with financial aid. One hundred and fifty farmers lost contracts with the plant, and were forced to rip up fields of peach and pear trees.

More recently, J.M. Smucker Co. announced the pending closure of its Bick's pickle plant in Delhi,

Ontario. The company had contracts with 200 cucumber growers in the region when it bought the plant in 2006 for \$12 million. "This decision will provide greater manufacturing and sourcing flexibility, enabling us to be more cost-competitive," said a Bick's spokesperson in the Delhi News-Record.

'We can't compete on price'

Although processing is still fairly strong in Ontario, with more than 3,000 processors in the province, they have become larger with more corporate ownership and buying policies that favour imports.

In 2003, Waterloo Region Public Health published a report on food flow in the region -- a picture of what is produced here and where it ends up. The report's authors contacted processors in every food sector -- meat, milk, eggs, poultry and produce. It found that jam and condiment manufacturer e.d. Smith, headquartered in Winona -- the heart of Ontario's fruit belt -- sources none of its strawberries from the region, but rather Mexico and California. Same with Smuckers and Kraft Canada. Golden Town Apple Products, in Thornbury, ON, is one of the top three apple processors in the entire country, but only three per cent of the apples it juices, dries and cans, come from the region.

This speaks to the root cause of the disappearing of processing facilities, says Peter Katona, the executive director of FoodLink Waterloo.

"There's lots of buzz about a lack of processing facilities and a need to build new infrastructure," he says. "Nobody's still really looked at the root cause of why we lost our processing infrastructure, which is price. Just building those facilities has not touched the price tag of the end product."

Labour is a big part of this price. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average farm labourer wage is from \$7.76 to \$8.29 an hour. In Mexico, it's an estimated \$3.60 USD per day. Minimum wage in Ontario is now \$10.25 an hour, and as the

Pfennings found out, expanding their operation meant a big increase in labour costs. Ontario also has some of the highest health and safety standards in the world, says Katona. "Can we do it?" asks Katona. "Sure we can. But we can't compete on price."

'The market is starving for that local product'

But some local food manufacturers are finding they can compete on quality, taste and the allure of a local label. The Barrie Bros. local food company launched out of a desire to extend the Barrie farm's asparagus harvest. They recently launched a line of products, including crackers, pasta, salsa, tortilla chips and soups, made from their asparagus and other local produce.

"It's very costly to bring a product to market," says Tom Barrie, whose great-grandfather started the farm, located just outside Cambridge, in 1892. "That being said, the market is starving for that local product. Our crackers, we started by just picking up a few cases, now we're going through skids of them. Our products are in a hundred markets in Ontario."

The Barries have a different partner for every product to protect themselves, so they aren't going to the same manufacturer for the pasta or the crackers. They sell mainly in smaller, often gourmet retail shops, as well as some Foodland franchises in the region.

"Some of the products are at a premium," Barrie says. "For example, we use Ontario tomatoes and Ontario garlic, not garlic from China, in our salsa, which makes it more expensive. But I'm only a half hour drive from our [cracker] miller. That can cut down costs."

"Almost every day we're getting contacted by a new store. In one year, our sales are heading straight north."

Plenty of Local Food, Few Local Food Products

To help change that, BC producers are pressing for a local food technology centre to help bring local products to market.

By Jeff Nield

Originally published on November 12, 2010,

<http://thetyee.ca/News/2010/11/12/PlentyOfLocalFood/>

“Most of the food people eat is processed,” says [Left Coast Naturals](#) president Ian Walker.

This simple truth sums up what may be the biggest hurdle for our local food system in feeding the masses. Until 30 years ago the Fraser Valley was home to a diverse food processing industry. Along with local dairies, meat packers and vegetable canners, the processing industry was a collective of branch plants for many ubiquitous supermarket brands. Kraft, Nabob and Lipton all had operations in the valley.

By the mid-’90s the consolidation of the food processing industry had hit full stride. Multinationals gobbled up local small- and mid-sized companies and centralized processing in super-plants strategically placed to take advantage of economies of scale, cheap inputs and cheap labour.

Despite the lost infrastructure, a certain breed of food entrepreneur prospered in the vacuum left by the big players. Catching a ride on the consumer wave that emerged from the organic and natural food movement, companies including Happy Planet Foods, Yves Veggie Cuisine, Nature’s Path, Omega Nutrition and Left Coast Organics (at the time, Skeet & Ike’s) were either founded or came of age in the later half of the ‘90s and early in the past decade.

But aside from some current research and development at Left Coast, none of these brands take ad-



vantage of B.C.’s bounty of raw materials. They are companies that were, and are, tied to this place culturally, but really, we’re just lucky that their production facilities sprouted in our communities and provided jobs and other spin-off benefits.

There’s no doubt that the potential payoff is huge. In 2005 (the latest year that statistics are available) B.C.’s 1,488 food and beverage processors generated

\$6.5 billion in revenue and employed 31,500 people. At the time this ranked food and beverage processing as the second largest industrial sector in the province, behind wood products. According to Dave Eto, president of the BC Food Processors Association, the economic winds have changed since then and “agriculture as a whole in British Columbia is now the largest manufacturing sector of all.”

Diversified farms support diversified processors

Like most of B.C.’s farms, most of our processors are small, with an employee base of five full-time equivalents or less. “Seventy per cent of all of our total 1,400 processors is that size,” says Eto. “So, you have a lot of people who are very small in scale, very diverse and very eclectic. All of those elements that go along with having such high flexibility and diversity, more so than any other province in Canada.”

If diversity is a key to success for small- and medium-scale farmers, it would make sense that the same principal is equally important to a processing industry that relies on those farms for raw materials.

“It brings a great opportunity, of course, when you talk about being able to source unique and different foodstuffs within different regions within the province, but the problem of course then is scale, right, because those companies have a difficult time moving up and exporting and serving larger markets,” Eto points out.

Which begs the question, is it possible, or even desirable, to bring a local, processed product to market solely to supply the local market? Probably not. This approach may work for perishable staples like dairy, meat and eggs, but the average person can only eat so much jam, salad dressing and potato chips. With shelf staples like these, the obvious business case is to capture the largest market share, beyond any defined local boundary.

But with the current consumer shift towards local food, any product with a locally sourced ingredient list would presumably have an automatic market that

would at least try the product once, says Walker. The hard part is getting these products out there in the first place.

Bringing products to market

Whether an entrepreneur is looking to create prepared salads from local ingredients to supply local hospitals, or attempting to exploit the Fraser Valley’s overproduction of blueberries by making and marketing the next big international health food phenomenon, the lack of infrastructure puts up a brick wall.

When Left Coast Naturals saw a market gap and decided to produce a natural tortilla chip, the company had to go to California to find a facility with the equipment to make their Hippie Chip line of snacks. “The infrastructure just isn’t here,” explains Walker. This co-packer makes the chips to the specifications of Left Coast and ships them north to the company’s warehouse.

In the late ‘80s, when Arran Stephens of Nature’s Path decided on organic breakfast cereal as his new venture he also had to go to California to get it made. After discovering that the co-packer who was making the cereal for him didn’t take his insistence on organic certification seriously, and a confrontation on the floor of a natural food trade show, Stephens, along with his wife Ratana, decided they would build their own factory and manufacture the cereal themselves.

This gave them complete control over the quality of their product as well as a larger share of the profit. Stephens believes a relationship with a co-packer is useful while launching a product. “But I don’t think that model works in the long run because you’ve got an extra cost in there,” he explains. “And that is the profit of the co-packer.”

Both Left Coast Naturals and Nature’s Path were built from small operations into diversified companies. (A big part of Left Coast’s business is as a distributor of natural and organic food brands.) The founders of both companies embody an entrepreneurial spirit that suggests they would have been successful whatever

their venture. “It was mostly by gosh and by golly and by trial and error and finally we developed products that were better than anything else on the market,” says Stephens.

While these types of success stories are inspiring, it’s not enough to build an industry on spirit alone.

“Here’s the problem,” says Eto. “We don’t have a lot of industry to support the growth of smaller businesses that need to find capacity somewhere.”

Eto and his colleagues at the B.C. Food Processors Association (BCFPA) have been lobbying to develop a food technology centre in the Lower Mainland to help bring products to market. He says B.C. is the only province without a centre and as a result we’re missing an opportunity to build our local processing industry by exporting all of the R&D, product development and testing.

This industry-led initiative is only one of a number of similar, if smaller, efforts being proposed throughout the region. New City Market in Vancouver, River Market in New Westminster, a small-scale processing facility in Hope and a food business incubator based in the Downtown Eastside have all been floated as projects to build our local food system. “What’s really great, that I’m finding, is that the industry is not being myopic,” says Eto.

“They’re saying, ‘Hey, we need to have representation right across, because it strengthens our food industry as a whole,’ and that’s really what it’s all about.”

A Nursery For New Farmers

At the McVean Incubator Farm, a little land goes a long way for people who want to get in the business of growing local food.

By Colleen Kimmett

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Bahauddin Baloch labours up a dusty dirt road with a wheelbarrow full of sunflower heads. He pulls the barrow behind him, past the bee hives, past the old barn and rows of corn, to the edge of the farm property, where he dumps its contents and then pauses to wipe the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

“We have a lot of finches around here, and they love to eat this,” he says. You can hear the birds chirping away in the bushes nearby. At dusk, the finches will go to roost and the deer arrive. This farm, set on the Humber River, is a thoroughfare for the deer, and Baloch knows they love to stop and eat the vegetables he grows. He watches them each evening, his presence keeping them at bay, until night falls and he drives home.

The [McVean farm](#) is named for Alexander McVean, an early British settler who started growing wheat on the property 150 years ago. He was one of the first farmers in what is now Brampton, a sprawling city northwest of Toronto. Brampton is the 11th largest city in Canada, with one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations. The farm is a wild oasis in a landscape dominated by large warehouses (corporate giants like Loblaws and Zellers are headquartered here), four-lane industrial traffic corridors and large housing developments like the one right across the road from the farm.

The only reason this property hasn't met the same fate is because it lies within the Claireville Conservation



area, owned by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA). And while in some ways it is the last vestige of a dying era of agriculture, it also represents the beginning of a new one.

Incubator Farm a ‘safe’ place to learn and grow

In 2008, the TRCA leased the 37-acre property to [FarmStart](#), an organization whose mandate is to support new farmers, to create the McVean Incubator Farm. The Incubator Farm program is a big piece of the work that FarmStart does (they have two others in the Guelph area). It's modeled after a program started in Vermont, and the premise is to help new farmers get established by giving them access to land, equipment and infrastructure at affordable prices.

Baloch is one of 17 small-scale farmers who lease land at McVean. The plots range from half an acre to

10 acres. Rent is \$80 per acre, per year, and farmers also have to pay for water and to use a shared tractor. They have free use of basic farm implements like roto-tillers and shovels, and access to an irrigation system, washing facilities and refrigerated storage. There is a tent at the end of the farm's long laneway where they can sell produce, but most sell what they grow at farmers' markets in the city, and through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs.

"The model of FarmStart is basically the best thing," says Baloch. "We have all the tools and machines available, and a network for farmers is available when we need it for guidance. The network makes a big difference."

Saulis Tribinevicius is the farm manager. He's a tall, soft-spoken man who grew up on a hobby farm north of here and who has always worked in agriculture. Before he came to McVean, he worked at a commercial organic vegetable farm in Hamilton, where, over the years, he noticed more farmers going organic and switching to direct-sales marketing, either at farmers' markets or through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) models.

"In a commercial setting, you have to perform," he says. "But here, we're trying to make it a safe environment to be able to make mistakes, because farmers are learning, so that there's not too much risk for them financially."

"We hope that after three to five years, farmers who have been here would be able to leave and start their own business. Some of the earlier incubators have started their own businesses."

Agriculture a critical component of sustainable communities

The McVean property is part of a larger conservation area owned by the TRCA. For a long time, the finches and the deer were the only occupants of this land. Then, in 2008, the TRCA adopted a policy document called Living City, which recognized the importance of what's known as near-urban, or peri-urban agriculture: "Near-urban agriculture supports not only

healthy rivers and regional biodiversity through soil regeneration, ecological restoration and ecosystem integrity, but it is also a critical component of sustainable communities," it stated.

It was in this context that the TRCA partnered with FarmStart. Never before had it offered this kind of long-term lease, but it did so in recognition that tenure security was important if the farmers were going to invest and grow. In return, FarmStart agreed to abide by organic farming practices. Tribinevicius says they have not yet gone through the certification process, but next year each farm will be able to provide the records to do so.

Given this land, and the security to invest in it, the farmers at McVean are so far yielding good results.

Eric Rosenkrantz and his business partner Hanna Jacobs of [Matchbox Garden and Seed Co.](#) are some of those McVean farmers who are ready to graduate. The business is five years old, and provides seeds, produce and seedlings to Toronto markets, as well as to members of a CSA program. On a picnic table near their three-acre plot are soil samples from another property owned by a regional conservation authority. Rozenkrantz says they're in negotiations to move in next season.

"This is where we've developed our chops at growing food," he says. "We both have some farm experience, but neither of us are from a farming background per se. We figured, well, this is an up and coming industry."

Farming, an up and coming industry? Absolutely, says Rosenkrantz. The key is doing it small-scale, with few inputs, and having close access to urban markets.

'Farming can make money'

Rosenkrantz and Jacobs use biodynamic gardening techniques to get the maximum yield from their few acres.

"There's a compounding growth in your yield if you companion plant well," he says. "We produce, at the

height of the season, about two tonnes of food per week. When it's all said and done, by the end of October, we expect to make about \$25,000 dollars per acre per year from this garden here."

Rosenkrantz admits that he's stopped looking at how much he's making an hour. It's useless, he says. "If I'm getting by, and this is working, then I'm happy. The business, I realize, can grow if my production methods improve and I get a bit more land."

Plus, he says, he's noticed that the price difference between what he sells at the market and what is sold at the grocery store has decreased over the past few years.

"These days, we're getting competitive, because the price of food is going up. That's the other thing about the global food system, is that really bizarre things affect the price. The price of fuel affects the price. The value of the American dollar affects the price."

Baloch also abides by the small is better rule. He left a high-stress job in the IT world to try his hand at farming. Baloch started at McVean in 2008 with a half-acre of test crops. Last year was his first commercial year. He sells at three markets in Brampton and Toronto, and from one acre he made \$20,000 gross sales. Although he stills relies on consulting work in the winter, his goal is to make his entire living from market gardening. He now has five acres, and by his calculation, with careful planning, planting and crop rotation, he can do it within two years.

"My target is that I gotta make one dollar per square foot of cultivated land," he says. "Farming can make money. You have to be small-scale, where you work for yourself, and use small to mid-sized machinery. And if you can lease it, instead of investing, that's the best solution."

Welcome to Farm School

A new generation of farmers is digging into books before they go out in the field.

By Jeff Nield

Originally published on November 19, 2010,
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Every couple of months, for the past 10 years or so, I start feeling restless. The noise and chaos of the city intensifies in my brain to a point just shy of aneurism, I question the worth of whatever it is I'm working on and I develop a conspicuous facial twitch. My go-to stress relief in times like this is a recurring daydream I have about farming. This daydream generally has me frolicking in the fields all day, saying hello to the bluebirds and sunshine and feasting on nature's bounty that bursts aplenty from the earth with little to no effort.

Daydream indeed. I've visited enough farmers on their farms to know that they rarely frolic, birds are to be shooed away from the new planting, and the bounty comes after a season of arduous toil.

Romantic notions aside, some research suggests that with the evolution of the global food system beyond peak oil a good number of us day-dreamers will need to snap out of it and actually get our hands dirty.

'Local scale, human intensive'

"The agriculture that we should bring about substantially is local scale, human intensive, ecologically sound," says Dr. Kent Mullinix from Kwantlen Polytechnic University. The director of Sustainable Agri-food Systems acknowledges that, "The fact of the matter is this post industrial agri-food system is going to require a lot of people, in particular a lot of farmers."



Mullinix references the work of Richard Heinburg from the Post Carbon Institute whose research suggests that the United States will need up to 50 million new farmers to work the land and feed the people in a post carbon world. That's roughly 17 per cent of the current population. Applying that number to British Columbia suggests that three quarters of a million of us will need to take up the hoe. At the moment, I'm feeling woefully unprepared.

Following the path to the farm

Chris Bodnar is the archetype of British Columbia's new generation of farmers. At 33, he's well below the average age of farmers in the country. He does not come from a farming background, is university educated and he sees farming as a political and social act; a practical way to extend the food security work he'd already been doing.

In 2007, Bodnar and his family paid heed to the pull of the soil and decided to head back to the land despite having no actual land to farm and zero experience. For most people this combination of barriers is enough to put any farming fantasy on hold indefinitely, but Bodnar's obstacle was more mental. "It was funny, at the time, the biggest thing that stood in my way was recognizing I didn't have to go into academics," he says.

"We're very satisfied with the choice we've made."

Nearing the completion of his PhD in communications, Bodnar became depressed by the thought of continuing in academics and entering "the race for tenure." After much soul-searching, a nudge or two from his wife and a reminder from some friends that he always said he was working on his PhD "for interest's sake" and not to launch an academic career he made the leap from the classroom to the field.

Within a week of publicly declaring his intention to become a farmer, at a [FarmFolk/CityFolk](#) meeting, Bodnar was being toured around the Fraser Valley and introduced to an organic farming community that would quickly accept him as one of their own in spite of his lack of farming experience.

In a testament to impeccable timing Bodnar and his family landed at [Glen Valley Organic Farm](#), a cooperatively owned 50-acre slice of riverfront heaven, at the precise moment when retiring farmer John Switzer was looking for fresh blood to mentor to continue on his good work. Bodnar originally felt that he was too inexperienced to be able to offer much to the farm, but the community that owns and operates Glen Valley knew that the skills from the rest of his life were as important as knowing how to farm, which could be learned. (The joke around the farm being that every farm needs a PhD -- post-hole digger.)

"They were looking for someone who had a similar value set and a set of skills that contributed to the larger vision of what the farms purpose was," recalls Bodnar. The farm had found their farmer.

Workers the missing piece of a local food system

Bodnar's path to becoming a farmer is atypical, and while seemingly quick he had, perhaps unknowingly, been laying the groundwork to make the shift to the land for years. His eventual path was laid by his involvement with what he calls the "food scene" at FarmFolkCityFolk. (We're not talking the snooty crowd that noshes on "duos" of this and "jus de" that, but practical folks cultivating a just and sustainable local food system.) "If you're not part of an agricultural scene or a food scene it takes a while to get to know who's who and what's happening," he says. "I think the big thing is realizing that it's not an instant process." Luckily for any wannabe farmer in B.C. there are now myriad paths to the farm.

"There's a lot of talk, and a lot of effort, around greening local, regional food systems, human scale food systems, direct market food systems, and very little discussion and very little effort around preparing people to actualize that system, to make it happen," says Kwantlen's Mullinix.

Which is why he and his colleagues launched the Richmond Farm School. The school is part of a larger body of research to "actualize municipal enabled sustainable agriculture," that will develop a bio-regional food system.

And farming can be an economically viable choice, as Bodnar and other new farmers in B.C. and Ontario have learned, if it's scaled appropriately, and close enough to cities or suburbs that they can market directly to consumers.

While Bodnar still considers himself a new farmer, proof of the value of his unique skills that he didn't consider useful to farming is evidenced by the fact that he now teaches the farm business planning and management class at the farm school. Mullinix asked Bodnar to teach the class shortly after accessing Glen Valley's financial records and stating, "I've never seen farmers keep books like this."

“It’s not that I’m teaching it based on years and years of experience; it’s just an aspect of the scene that clicked with me very quickly,” explains Bodnar, happy to contribute to the overall success of the local food community.

Learning the business of farming

Nine students are currently finishing up the first year of classes, which includes all the land management, crop production and animal husbandry classes you would expect from any farm course, along with access to incubator farmland for up to three years that the city of Richmond has provided for the students to hone their craft. If they choose, students can also use the credit from the farm school courses to put towards a degree program at the university. Mullinix envisions similar farm schools in many municipalities in B.C.

Kwantlen’s farm school is one of a handful of venues in B.C. where eager students can learn the ins and outs of what Mullinix repeatedly refers to as human-scale food systems. UBC’s 8-month long Sowing Seeds sustainable agriculture practicum is entering its fourth year. Much like the Kwantlen program it’s a mixture of practical classroom learning and hands-on experience. But both of these programs are following the path laid down by Linnaea Farm on Cortes Island where the Ecological Garden Programme has taught students “a thorough grounding in organic gardening and small-scale farming through a full growing season” since 1987. Bodnar also suggests neophyte farmers looking to take a path more akin to his journey check out the Canada wide apprenticeship opportunities listed by the Stewards of Irreplaceable Land (SOIL).

Bodnar acknowledges that the current wave of people interested in the farming lifestyle could be compared to the back-to-the-land movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s, but feels that today’s converts are much more prepared. “There’s a realistic understanding that farming is a business and you have to be able to support yourself,” he says. “You’re not just going to find a patch of land somewhere and set up shop and do

subsistence farming.” And although we’re also just scratching the surface, those with the knowledge are recognizing the need to train new farmers so that they don’t fail.

Eggsasperating!

Organic egg producers in BC say regulations 'gone haywire' prevent them from keeping up with hungry local demand.

By Colleen Kimmett

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<http://thetyee.ca/News/2010/11/25/Eggsasperating/>

Karl Hann navigates his big white van through rush hour traffic in Vancouver's Kitsilano neighborhood. He slows down and hangs a left into the alley just north of trendy 4th Avenue. Hann pulls the truck in beside a dumpster, jumps down from the front seat and carefully lifts a large cardboard box out of the back. Balancing it on one hip, he walks up a few steps and opens a screen door into the tiny kitchen of a fine-dining restaurant. This is the part of Bishop's that its patrons rarely see.

Sous chef Geoff looks up and greets Hann, but he's preparing for the dinner rush and there's not much time for chitchat. The box goes in the fridge, Hann confirms the next week's order, and then he's on his way.

Three times a week Hann loads up his van and drives into the city to sell eggs from his Abbotsford farm. Mondays and Thursdays are delivery days, and most Saturdays he's at the Trout Lake farmers' market. A growing demand for organic eggs has allowed Hann expand his flock from a few hundred to 2,000 birds. But technically, he's not supposed to be selling these eggs at all -- he doesn't have the quota required to produce them.

But Hann says he's filling a much-needed supply. He and other producers assert that the [B.C. Egg Marketing Board \(BCEMB\)](#), the body that oversees egg production in the province and administers quota, has not been responsive enough to an increasing consum-



er demand for organic, and other types of specialty eggs, which include free-range, free-run and omega enriched eggs.

And although the BCEMB disagrees, pointing to a new organic producer program as proof, the whole debate raises questions about the role of marketing boards and the challenges that new, non-conventional farmers face when trying to break into supply-managed industries.

The problem with quota

Eggs are one of three supply-managed agricultural industries in Canada (the others are poultry and dairy), which means the markets are regulated with fixed prices on domestically provided products, high tariffs on imports, and quotas on production. The national egg marketing board sets quota for each province, and

the BC Egg Marketing Board is responsible for allocating that quota to producers around the province.

The board was created in 1967 -- as the first egg marketing board with quota in Canada -- after egg production outpaced demand and drove down prices in B.C. With so many suppliers to choose from, people who operated graders (which sort eggs according to quality, or “grade” and size, and then wash and package them) could threaten to move on to the next guy if they didn’t get a price they demanded.

“You are not supposed to go out and say, ‘Oh, I can produce cheaper eggs,’” says Hann. “No, you are supposed to fill a market, you are not supposed to undercut. On that point I agree with the regulations.

“But the way the system has evolved has gone hay-wire. Somebody has not paid attention to it.”

One of the ways in which supply-managed systems have changed is the fact that the value of quota in these industries has shot up over the years. Quota can be bought, sold or traded on the market. According to BCEMB chair Al Sakalaskus, quota to produce eggs is worth anywhere from \$160 to \$200 per hen, depending on the type.

While food security advocates say supply-managed markets are ultimately good for the farmer, they also acknowledge that the high price of quota has stifled innovation and change.

“The only lucrative farming that exists now is supply-managed farms, or micro-farms,” says Herb Barbolet, an associate with the Centre for Sustainable Community Development at SFU. “Basically, the supply-managed commodity farmers are the ones who are maintaining economic viability.” But it’s not perfect, he says.

“The way it’s run requires a lot more transparency and a lot more flexibility,” says Barbolet. “And the old guard is holding on tight.”

A recent report by the Metcalf Foundation acknowledged this as well. “Supply management does not,

however, work as well for those who engage in non-conventional forms of farming and for new farmers. Non-conventional farmers depend on their ability to differentiate themselves in the market, and they do their own marketing to let customers know about what they do differently. They do not benefit from economies of scale to the same degree, and they cannot justify the market price for quota given the production methods they use,” stated the report.

Demand for organic outpacing supply

Organic producers province-wide can’t keep up with demand for organic eggs in B.C. According to the BC Farm Industry Review Board, this province imported 200,000 dozen organic and free-run eggs from Alberta and Manitoba in 2008, compared to 11,800 that were exported from the province.

The legislated role of the BCEMB is to monitor market changes and adjust quota accordingly. Specialty eggs (which includes organic, free run, free range and omega) account for 16 per cent of egg sales at major grocery stores. But add actual sales of specialty eggs from farmers’ markets or smaller health food stores, and that share is certainly higher. According to a survey by the Vancouver Humane Society, 21 per cent of British Columbians buy non-conventional, battery-cage-raised eggs.

But the share of quota these producers received from the BCEMB in 2008 was just 11 per cent of total production.

In 2005, the Farm Industry Review Board instructed all of the supply-managed industries in the province to come up with plans to serve this growing demand for organic and specialty products.

The BCEMB responded four years later with a new producer program focused specifically on bringing more organic eggs into the market, quota for 12,000 hens. (The BCEMB plans to allocate quota for another 6,000 hens over the next two years, which would bring the percentage of total specialty egg production to about 15 per cent.)

But with this latest quota allocation, rather than give quota to egg producers who were already producing eggs and had requested the capacity to expand, it asked interested parties to submit business plans, and then drew winners through a lottery. All four winners are located in the already-saturated Fraser Valley, and one didn't even own any property yet, the Vancouver Sun reported at the time.

Stakeholder submissions on the lottery program were posted on the boards' website. One common thread was that the lottery system did nothing to address an immediate lack of supply for organic eggs particularly in regions outside of the Fraser Valley.

"If this lottery system is really the best strategy you can come up with, then at least use separate 'hats' for each specialty egg: certified organic, free range, omega 3 enhanced, etc., and replicate it for each region of the province in the interest of fairness and diversity," wrote Susan Davidson of Glorious Organics.

'The worse thing they can do is ignore it'

Ian Christison owns Daybreak Farms in Terrace. He produces and grades conventional as well as omega and free-run eggs for wholesale across the province.

"The marketing board has to be looking at the requirements of a region and focus on the marketing of the product to ensure that we are supplying 100 per cent of B.C.'s market with B.C. production," says Christison. "That to me is where 90 per cent of the problem is. But they don't seem to get it and they don't want to."

He says they can't produce enough organic eggs in the Interior to fill demand. "We bring in eggs from [Lower Mainland producer/grader] Golden Valley wherever we can in terms of omega and free run," Christison says. "We have no idea at this point what kind of a market we could have. We could only assume that the market up here would be no different from anywhere."

The Farm Industry Review Board (FIRB) is an administrative tribunal responsible for supervising the BCEMC and other regulated marketing boards. Chair

Jim Collins says his board has told the BCEMB more than once that it has to engage with what he calls the "social movement" that is driving demand for specialty eggs.

"The egg industry is in transition," says Collins. "We're asking them to be as responsive as they can. They think they are... others think that they're not."

"Our board has told them more than once that you have to engage in these issues so you can help," he says. "If you have a social movement like this, whether you agree with it or not, the best thing to do is you need to engage that social movement and talk to people and manage the transition."

"The worse thing they can do is ignore it," Collins says. "They believe that they're starting to be responsive. We'll see what the final outcome of that is."

Producers not 'locked in': BCEMB

When asked about the gap in specialty egg supply, BCEMB chair Al Sakalaskus points out that this egg shortage is not limited to the specialty market. This year, all egg producers fell short of meeting demand, not just specialty. He pointed to the new producer program as evidence of how the board is responding to demand for specialty eggs. Sakalaskus also noted that farmers can have 99 or fewer hens without permission from the BCEMB. And the board regulates producers who have between 99 and 399 laying hens, but does not require quota.

"We're looking at the specialty industry and trying to gauge where the market is going to be sometime in the future," Sakalaskus says. "We know what we sell, and we know what the marketplace absorbs, but the art in this whole industry is trying to gauge consumer behaviour some two-and-a-half years in the future, where we have to make a decision today as to what type of product that will be in demand."

Sakalaskus also points out that producers are not locked into one category. "If Jimmy Pattison says I want more free range eggs and he tells a grading station I want more free range eggs, it goes down the system and regular producers will be incentivized by

the grading industry to switch over if there is a hole in the marketplace.”

So what’s driving demand for specialty eggs today? “I don’t really have to explain it,” says Sakalaskus. “But God bless ‘em for buying.”

Rob Marten is one farmer who’s successfully made the transition to the specialty egg market. After a career in the conventional battery-cage sector, he bought a farm in Chilliwack where he now raises 4,000 free-range hens.

Marten also grew up on a farm with a facility that raised hens in battery cages. His decision to switch to free range practices was strictly business. “I can get more per bird,” he says. “I sincerely became a chicken farmer because I love working with chickens. Yes, I was working before with caged hens and I felt exactly on the same level.”

“Sometimes I get upset when I hear people say, ‘You can’t get into that business, it’s all protected.’ I found a market niche for free-range birds,” Marten says. “I didn’t have the quota so I made a deal with another producer where I lease the quota. That’s my way I’m working within the system, and anybody can do it.”

But Hann wonders why producers like him should be required to work in the system -- which includes paying a 40 cent per dozen levy to the BCEMB, if it’s not working for them.

“You have to understand that the marketing board is actually not doing any marketing at all. Especially the niche markets or anything new is a horror for these people. For me the market has grown basically by word of mouth and in most cases I had to decline new clients. I just do not have the capacity and in this environment of limbo, one cannot plan ahead or invest.”

Farmlands on the Brink

The fight over a farm in Delta raises the question of whether protecting agricultural land is a matter of all or none.

By Jeff Nield

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<http://thetyee.ca/News/2010/11/26/FarmlandsBrink/>

Hemmed in by Delta to the east, Point Roberts to the south and the Salish Sea to the west, Southlands is a 538-acre British Columbia farm that has been in the middle of a tug-of-war between developers and farmland defenders for nearly four decades.

The president of the development company that owns Southlands has proposed a plan that he says could serve both interests equally. Proponents argue that it could serve as a model for a new form of planning -- agricultural urbanism -- where people and farms can co-exist. Opponents fear it will only drive up the prices of already expensive, and scarce, farmland in the region.

Southlands' turbulent history

The first attempt to develop the Southlands property was in the early 1970s, when its previous owner, George Spetifore, unsuccessfully proposed a 3,500 home development on the property.

When the agricultural land reserve (ALR) was brought into existence a couple of years later, the farm became a part of the reserve, only to be controversially removed from the ALR in 1981. Another proposal for development on the property was defeated by a public outcry in 1989. The Century Group acquired the property shortly after when the landowner defaulted on their mortgage. In 2006, Century Group President Sean Hodgins proposed a new vision for the land that he hoped would serve the interest of the overall community.



“Seeing some farming happen, and not happen, on the property over the years, it was clear that there was some element of farming that could happen in the future,” says Hodgins.

The plan that was eventually proposed would see one-third of the site developed for housing, one-third for community amenities including parkland and one-third for agriculture. “I was trying to cross the bridge, if you will, between our aspirations to develop something, without paving it over, and recognizing the stated community desire of ‘Well, we don’t want to lose farming in the equation here.’”

Despite Hodgins's stated intent, opponents to the plan suggest that if the project were to go ahead that it would make farmland scarcer and less affordable for farmers. "Farmland is already expensive because of speculation that land might be removed from the ALR," says Harold Steves, founding director of the [Farmland Defence League](#). "If the concept of developing one third of our farmland caught, prices would go up and no farmland would be safe." For the proposal to go ahead the Century Group needed an amendment to Delta's official community plan to change the zoning of the property from agricultural to mixed use. That request was denied, and the project stalled.

Agricultural Urbanism: a win-win?

"We need to break the dialogue up between build, don't build," says Janine de la Salle, who worked as a planner on the project with mission-driven planning firm HB Lanarc. "The Southlands was the first kind of innovation and foray into that in-between dialogue. It was an experiment into how we could actually invest in agriculture through development capital."

Recently awarded the Young Planner of the year award by the Canadian Institute of Planners de la Salle has made it her *raison d'être* to find innovative ways to incorporate food systems into all levels of planning. She, along with HB Lanarc senior planner Mark Holland, coined the term "agricultural urbanism" to define their food system work and published a book of the same name.

Citing influences ranging from permaculture guru Bill Mollison, writer Michael Pollan and philosopher/farmer Wendell Berry to Bill Rees, *Short History of Progress* author Ronald Wright and Herb Barbolet, the grandfather of Vancouver's food security movement, it's clear that de la Salle and Holland are viewing the issues of our local food system with a wide and deep lens. Written as a "handbook for building sustainable food and agriculture systems in 21st century cities" *Agricultural Urbanism* was their response to the flood of books on alternative food systems that offered a snapshot of the burgeoning populist movement, but

were short on suggestions for how to proceed. "It's about looking for new solutions because we're at a point where we need them," says de la Salle.

The short definition of what Agricultural Urbanism is about is "a way of building a place around food." Going deeper, the concept is meant to integrate everything from food access, the food economy, infrastructure needs, education, wildlife habitat, place-making (making food visible in the community), policy and how food systems can contribute to climate change solutions.

"Connecting food systems to planning is very new," says de la Salle.

After WWII and the rapid auto-centric development of North American cities, food was treated like any other commodity and many parts of the food system were centralized and consolidated to take advantage of economies of scale. There was uninterrupted abundance at the supermarket so nobody questioned the system. Agriculture and processing were dealt with by zoning, which was changed at the whims of elected officials and, presumably, the public will.

Lessons from Terra Nova

"There used to be beef cattle, cabbage growers, all kinds of things," says Arzeena Hamir.

Amid a chorus of birds, the crunch of frozen ground and a schizophrenic wind chime battered by an aggressive wind, the [Richmond Food Security Society](#) co-ordinator explains the history of the surrounding area and how the 63-acre Terra Nova Rural Park was established with an eastern boundary lined by the backyards of two-dozen monster homes.

When the owners of the Terra Nova lands applied to remove the property from the reserve, Richmond city council voted 5-4 in favor of the removal, but the agricultural land commission disagreed. The provincial government ignored the commission's ruling and removed it at the cabinet level. Public dissatisfaction with these backroom political dealings cost four of

the five Richmond city councilors their jobs when the next civic election rolled around, but not before a good chunk of the neighbourhood was already built, paving over some of Richmond's most fertile farmland.

"It's one of those neighbourhoods where the houses all look the same," says Hamir. The uniformity doesn't come cheap either. The MLS listings for the three houses closest to the park average a cool \$1.5 million. But, in a round-about way it's the existence of this neighbourhood of 3000 square foot homes that made Terra Nova Rural Park possible.

"We stopped the development from going any further," says Harold Steves, who was on Richmond city council at the time. The city held a public referendum to spend \$29 million to buy the remaining land with public money. Richmond residents responded with a strong majority favoring the plan and Terra Nova Rural Park was born.

Development a slippery slope: Steves

Despite a thin blanket of snow and the unfriendly wind it's easy to see the concepts of agricultural urbanism on display at Terra Nova Rural Park in Richmond. The 99-plot community garden is the biggest in Richmond. A sharing garden provides much needed fresh produce to the Richmond Food Bank and other service providers, the farm centre houses a community kitchen and students from local schools tend plots during less frigid weather.

Activity on the property is also tied to a bigger effort of urban growing in the city. "We know there's at least 100 acres in the city," says Hamir of land that has been inventoried for farming. Her hope is that these acres will be actively farmed and the food will be sold in the community. In agricultural urbanism jargon, Terra Nova will act as a hub, supporting the larger efforts in the community.

The example of Terra Nova can be both celebrated and lamented. Celebrated for their current success and innovation, but lamented because so much land

was lost before the public outcry was heeded. The danger now in the Southlands is that future circumstances will allow a less scrupulous development than Hodgins's (which at least has a vision of community benefit) to take place and the entire piece of property will be lost under pavement. But this is a chance that the farmland defenders are willing to take, believing that any further paving of farmland is unconscionable. In the short-term, plans for the Southlands look to be exactly what Steves, Hamir and their colleagues had hoped for.

"We don't have any definite plans," says Hodgins. "We will try to farm it, that's what we'll try to do."

Farmers Harvesting the Sun's Rays

Make conditions right, and renewable energy could become a profitable crop for food growers across Canada.

By Colleen Kimmett

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Dave Ferguson, like all farmers, spends a good deal of time watching the weather. Today he's keeping an eye on the clouds that have been forming all afternoon. The air is heavy, humid, and you can almost taste the rain.

This time of year, early fall, is when the weather matters most. Ferguson is a cash cropper in southwestern Ontario, about an hour from London. Like most farmers here he grows soy, corn and wheat, and he needs to harvest while the sun shines. Timing is everything in this line of business, and two main forces will determine the difference between a good year and a bad year: the weather and the global markets. That's true for any farmer, but especially for those like Ferguson who depend entirely on these three food commodities.

Well, almost entirely. This year, Ferguson started harvesting solar energy on his farm, thanks to a new program in Ontario, **MicroFIT**, that offers a premium for energy generated from renewable sources like wind and solar.

"We are in food production, but now I'm in energy production with a minimal use of land," says Ferguson, standing in front of his two solar arrays, which sit in a tall grassy patch of land near the property line of his 100-acre farm. "This is helping me with some security for later on down the road."

Since the MicroFIT program launched last year, even supporters have been quick to point out that it has



had its fair share of problems. But it proved that, with government support, farmers will eagerly invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in renewable technology -- the kind of small-scale, distributed and diverse renewable technology that many experts say we need to invest in right now. Farmers in B.C. say it offers the kind of incentive that we need here to help both struggling farmers and a nascent green tech sector.

In 2009, Premier Dalton McGuinty's Liberals introduced the Green Energy Act in Ontario. One of the things it did was expand the feed-in tariff (FIT) program, whereby the provincial arms-length utility,

the Ontario Power Authority (OPA), would pay more for energy produce using renewable resources like wind or solar. The Ontario Federation of Agriculture welcomed the act, calling it an opportunity for farmers to take part in the “green energy revolution” and help create new manufacturing opportunities. “OFA will work with the government to ensure necessary safeguards accompany green energy developments to preserve farmland and protect the interests of rural residents,” stated OFA president Bette Jean Crews in a press release.

The MicroFIT program is part of that, but it targets small projects, 10 kilowatts or less, that are installed and owned by individual homeowners or businesses. In return, those businesses and homeowners were guaranteed a hook-up to the grid, and a 20-year contract selling energy to the province at 80.2 cents per kilowatt hour.

The government offered no limits, promising that the program would be open until 2011, and that anyone who met the conditions would be offered a contract. The Ontario Power Authority was immediately swamped with interested parties. Within six months of launching, the program had received 16,000 applications.

“This is a one-shot deal, the MicroFIT system,” says Ferguson. “The 80 cent a kilowatt hour [rate] was too rich -- it was a mistake by the OPA. But farmers can do math. We figured it out. This is a 10-year payback before I make money, then I have 10 years of making money. If you go to industry, they won’t look at a 10-year payback. Farmers will.”

In July of this year, when the Ontario government did in fact lower the rate offered under the MicroFIT program, there was a vocal backlash led in part by the [Ontario Federation of Agriculture \(OFA\)](#). It was successful in reversing the government’s original decision to have the new rate retroactively apply to those who already had a conditional contract, and had invested in solar equipment.

The OFA has been able to play a role in shaping the MicroFIT program in other ways: for example, by ensuring that the program prohibits energy generation on Class 1 or 2 farm land. Don McCabe, OFA vice president currently sits on a panel that is reviewing the program.

He says so far, their main concern is ensuring that farmers who have accepted a conditional contract are able to hook their project into the grid in a timely manner. “We do have concerns about ensuring that the connections of these things are dealt with in an appropriate manner to make sure we end up with a system that still has strong integrity in the long run,” says McCabe, adding that generally, farmers seem to be pretty happy with how it’s working so far. “The best feedback is no feedback.”

The biggest benefit of the program is that it’s helped farmers diversify their income, says McCabe.

Ferguson agrees, and says it’s been a financial boon not just for him but for the community as well. When the program was announced, Ferguson worked with nine other farmers in the area to collectively examine their options. They invited different solar and IT companies to give presentations, and were able to ask questions, ask for various features, and negotiate a price.

“This cost me a touch over \$90,000,” says Ferguson. “If I went out and bought a new 100 horsepower, name-brand tractor, front wheel assist, fairly loaded up, I’d be looking at the same kind of money. And a tractor I use a few hundred hours a week. These are working every day, seven days a week.”

Because the solar panels are hooked to the larger grid, it’s not energy being used directly on Ferguson’s farm. So it’s not helping the farm per se, he says. But it does help the farm’s bottom line, and it’s a secure source of income at a time when prices for global food commodities like soy, corn and wheat are volatile.

“Is it too rich, yes, maybe it shouldn’t have been this price,” he says. “But it made us jump and the money I make will be spent here in Ontario.”

Certainly, the MicroFIT program is not without its detractors. One energy analyst told the Toronto Star recently it has turned out to be an “unspeakable disaster.” A large part of the criticism is due to the fact that, even though the feed-in tariff has been reduced from 80.2 to 64.2 cents per kilowatt hour for any new producers under the program, it’s still costing the government -- and ratepayers -- a lot of money. The same electricity that OPA buys for 64.2 cents per kilowatt hour is sold wholesale to smaller utilities for between four and six cents per kilowatt hour. Electricity prices in Ontario have increased 18 per cent this year.

Still, renewable energy advocates like the [B.C. Sustainable Energy Association](#) and independent analyst Paul Gipe have said that a feed-in tariff is a key policy mechanism for strategically building renewable energy capacity so that it benefits rural and urban communities.

Because of B.C.’s hydro advantage, renewable energy in this province’s agricultural sector has mainly been focused on biogas.

Chilliwack farmer Chris Bush recently began converting cow manure and farm waste into bio-methane, and Bill Vanderkooi, a dairy farmer in Abbotsford, is in the process of turning his farm, the [Bakerview Eco-Dairy](#), into a commercial demonstration project for on-farm renewable energy. By the end of the month he expects to be finished the installation of an anaerobic digester that captures biogas from cow manure. That biogas will then be burned in a co-generator, to produce heat for the farm’s learning centre and hot water tanks. Vanderkooi expects it will produce enough electricity to meet about 30 per cent of the farm’s requirements.

Vanderkooi paid for the \$500,000 digester with help from the BC Bioenergy Network, BC Hydro and the provincial Environmental Farm Plan program.

Although his farm only has 50 cows, “the purpose of what we’re doing is to prove out this technology,”

says Vanderkooi. “We modeled it for a commercial-scale farm, somewhere between 150 and 200 cows.”

Aside from energy production, anaerobic digestion technology can pull nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus out of the manure. In the Fraser Valley, which is already over-burdened by these nutrients, Vanderkooi says this is perhaps the more exciting aspect of anaerobic digestion.

But he says that, compared to Ontario, B.C. is still at a disadvantage when it comes to on-farm renewable energy. “There is a proposal put forward to the ministry for a green energy rate that includes anaerobic digestion,” he says. “But the policies aren’t really in place here in B.C. the way they are in Ontario where they’ve been quite active over the past three years.”

Once the farm is in a stronger financial position, Vanderkooi says they want to get small wind and solar going.

“It’s a matter of finding the right partner and the right technology,” he says. “But a rate premium is really quite important to provide the incentive for these.”

How Bulk Buyers Can Save Local Farmers

Local Food Plus gets institutions with big food budgets to go local and sustainable, and that can really pay off.

By Colleen Kimmett

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Jamie Reaume holds up a huge carrot, black soil still clinging to it. “Farmers don’t care about a little dirt,” he declares, taking a bite. The rich dark soil, after all, is a matter of pride for the people who live in [Holland Marsh](#), also known as Ontario’s salad bowl.

It literally is a bowl, an 18,200-acre region north of Toronto that was once entirely swamp. In the early 1900s, surveyors realized that the “muck” soil underneath was highly fertile. Since then it’s been drained for agriculture, and now farms cover roughly 60 per cent of it. They produce about 10 per cent of all of Ontario’s vegetables, and generated \$29 million in 2006, according to Statistics Canada.

Farmers here send produce south to Toronto by the tractor-trailer load. They have no interest in farmers’ markets or buying clubs. But even for large-volume producers, it’s difficult to stay in business. Prices haven’t kept pace with the cost of everything else and it’s getting hard to compete with imports.

Reaume is the executive director of the Holland Marsh Growers Association, which formed in 2008 with funding from the Friends of the Greenbelt Association, to try and capitalize on a growing interest in local food and access new markets willing to pay a premium for made-in-Ontario produce.

And they’re doing it with help from [Local Food Plus](#) (LFP). Executive director Lori Stahlbrand describes the non-profit as a “relationship building”



organization. The local food movement is largely driven by people’s desire to know and trust where their food is coming from, she explains. LFP is trying to take it to the next level by creating a network of certified local and sustainable growers and connecting them with high-volume commercial customers, places like restaurants, retailers and especially large public institutions like universities and municipalities.

“All of that alternative stuff, farmers’ markets and CSA boxes, even if you add in all of the organic food sold in the big chains, adds up to about four per cent of the entire market, of the actual value of food sold in the marketplace,” says Stahlbrand. “They’re really

important in terms of some farmers making a good living and they can be really important for engaging people around food. But 96 per cent is still the same old, same old. It has to go beyond the alternative sources for this to really make a difference in a big way.”

How Local Food Plus works

LFP goes about doing this in several ways. The first step is ensuring potential buyers can identify what is local and sustainable. LFP’s certification system works by rewarding farmers points for meeting certain standards in four areas: crop production or animal welfare, energy use, biodiversity and labour standards. Farmers require a score of 75 per cent (out of an average of 1,200 points) plus must meet certain mandatory conditions in order to be certified, for example, GMO’s are prohibited.

Holland Marsh grower Doug Van Luyk says certification is basically a set of best management practices, which here in Holland Marsh, they’re doing anyway. But this marsh is unique in that it falls under several protection plans and legislative acts, including the Greenbelt Act, the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan, that regulate farming activities and limit pesticide inputs through an integrated pest management plan. “What it shows is that you’re basically following all the rules,” says Van Luyk.

So why get certified? “You want to know the real reason?” Reaume interjects. “Food Inc.”

The film about industrial farming had big effect on the local food movement, and essentially, Reaume explains, these farmers want to show that they aren’t that -- that they aren’t corporations, that they have families, they work long hours in the fields with their employees when they have to. “And you know what?” he says. “Local food plus provides a third-party certification process that allows the consumer to say... they’re a farmer, they’re not a producer.”

Most of the farmers here still sell to just a few main

buyers -- Loblaws, Metro and Sobeys – and while you can now see the Local Sustainable Holland Gold label in these stores, it’s too early to tell whether it’s helping sell more produce. And LFP has no formal relationship with these retailers to market it specially. “As the program expands, I hope that one day we will be able to work with them,” Stahlbrand says. “Frankly, we’re too small right now.”

Instead, LFP is focusing on where it has found success: with large public institutions that can see the environmental, social and economic rationale for supporting local sustainable food. Five years ago, they helped the executive chef at the one the University of Toronto’s largest residences develop a plan to buy more local produce. The chef, Jaco Lokker, started by devoting 10 per cent of his food budget to local sustainable food, and is now up to 22 per cent.

More recently, LFP partnered with the City of Markham, ON, to help it become the first municipality in North America to have a local food procurement policy. Others are jumping on board. Last October, Toronto city council agreed to develop a plan to achieve 50 per cent local food procurement for its daycares, shelters and seniors’ homes.

Most municipalities have the impression that international trade laws prohibit them from giving preference to local growers in their service contracts, says Stahlbrand. But so far, “anything we’ve come up against we’ve been able to get around.”

That’s because many of these institutions and jurisdictions, including Markham, contract private companies for food services. “At the point where there is a renewal of the contract... if we’re brought in to help work on the request for proposals, then we can work with the institutions to help them shape the language and work through how the program would work, based on our experiences and our understanding of the supply chains, and then that goes into the proposal,” says Stahlbrand. “And then all the bidders are now committed to it.”

Who wants to be a champion?

But working with institutions does require a champion, says Stahlbrand, someone who understands the institution, the politics, and is committed to getting administration on board.

“And if you find a person like that, you can make it happen,” says Stahlbrand. “We go where there’s interest. We figure there’s no point banging our heads against a brick wall, when there’s more than enough retailers and restaurants and institutions that... see the value in this.”

Local Food Plus is now putting down roots in British Columbia. It’s partnered with six farmers who are becoming certified, and Stahlbrand was recently in Vancouver meeting with administrators at Simon Fraser University.

While it’s a choice now, Stahlbrand envisions a future when peak oil prices will make imports and exports impossible. We need to be ready for that, she says, which is why her organization is trying to build capacity now.

“We don’t know how long a system where you’re bringing in food from far, far away is going to be able to survive. There’s all sorts of things that can disrupt those supply chains. And we don’t want to become completely dependent on that.”

‘Farmpreneurs’ Grow the Bounty

Investing in small-scale processing on the farm can make a big difference in its bottom line.

By Jeff Nield

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Just north of a sharp bend in the Puntledge river on the edge of Courtenay, B.C., sits [Nature’s Way Farm](#). Arriving at the farm-gate, there are two options for entry. One is through the welcoming door that leads to [Tria Culinary Studios](#) and the retail outlet for Blue Moon Winery.

I veer to the right, bypassing this obvious choice and enter through a slightly skewed wooden gate where I am quickly set upon by Gattie, a hefty Bernese Mountain dog who promptly sits on my foot in a maneuver she’s learned to demand attention. Once satisfied, Gattie releases her hold and I walk through to a central courtyard that offers a view of the 5.7-acre farm. Blueberry bushes, dormant for the season, sit straight-ahead, a farmhouse with cedar shingle siding is to the right and to the left is a building that I’ll soon discover doubles as an office and a winery. It’s in this final, also cedar clad, two-story building that I find farm owners George Ehrler and Marla Limousin hard at work on one of their many ventures.

Since buying the land in 2004, the couple has transformed it from a struggling blueberry farm into a thriving enterprise with multiple income sources. (The pair lucked out when the world went gaga over the anti-cancer properties of blueberries a month or so after they bought the farm.) The property houses three distinct farm-focused businesses along with acting as the HQ for their off-farm planning and consulting business.



Processing is a link in the food chain where a good chunk of the money is made. When it’s suitable, an on-farm processing facility can act as a solid foundation for the rest of the farm.

Farming with an entrepreneurial bent

Like most farmers I’ve met, Ehrler (by day an engineer), and Limousin (a community planner and landscape architect) didn’t get into farming for the money. The married couple was initially looking to buy a condo on Mt. Washington so their family would have easy access to the ski hill. But soon after Ehrler showed Limousin a listing he had found for the property online, they used one of their kids’ school field trip as an opportunity to see the farm and a week later they were farmers.

“We could, and have, sold all of it fresh,” says Ehrler of the 24,000 pounds of blueberries they harvest annually from a three-and-a-half-acre planting. Their entrepreneurial bent helped them realize that they would get a better economic return for their efforts if they had a diversified operation.

Along with the produce from the farm itself, including berries of all sorts, garlic, salad greens and other ground crops, Nature’s Way is home to Tria Culinary Studio which offers cooking classes, on-farm full moon feasts, and made-to-order crepes at events throughout the Comox Valley. Tria also highlights the products of the third farm enterprise, Blue Moon Winery.

“We were just looking out our bedroom window and said ‘What about wine from the blueberries,’” says Limousin. After some Internet-based research they realized a fruit winery was doable. Another stroke of luck had Ehrler hopping on the ferry to nearby Quadra Island to buy almost all of the equipment they would need to get started from a fruit vintner that was calling it quits. Four years since the first test batch, Blue Moon Winery is hitting its groove.

Small investments pay off big

“Our production will be ideally somewhere between 10- and 13,000 litres,” says Ehrler. While this keeps Blue Moon squarely in the small estate winery category, some rough mental math demonstrates that turning blueberries that sell for \$5 per pound (and other fruit with an even lower price point) into wine that sells for around \$20 a bottle equals a much greater economic return to the farm. “The winery will definitely take over in gross sales.”

“I would say that a lot of people want to do on-farm processing,” says Limousin. “And it’s being done in a small way, but they’re more looking for processing type facilities because of the cost.”

On-farm processing is not suitable for every crop, or every farmer, but it doesn’t have to be prohibitively expensive, says Randy Thompson, a burly, radio DJ-turned farmer who produces a line of sauces and

garlic salts on his 152-acre farm on the Fraser River just south of Quesnel.

“A lot of people have that ‘Oh, a commercial kitchen, it’s going to cost me a fortune,’ [idea]. It doesn’t have to.”

Thompson’s processing kitchen is relatively simple. Because of the nature of his product, stainless steel tables, a commercial fridge/freezer, a stockpot burner, sterilizing dishwasher, double sink, bottling equipment, food processor and dehydrator are all he really needs. “If I made things more complicated it would cost more.”

Thompson says processing is “all about science.” And he’s very particular about the quality of his products, which is why he decided to build a commercial kitchen on his farm, Oddball Organics.

“I wanted it to be organic and there wasn’t any organic processors that I knew of at the time that could keep the integrity of the product.” The perfect balance of sweet and hot in his Nuclear Nectar sauce reflects the care that has gone into both growing the garlic -- 19 varieties producing 42,000 bulbs from half an acre last year in a tough growing season -- and processing that harvest into products he’s proud to sell directly to his customers.

Building up the ‘Grain Chain’

Local farmers are giving antique machines new life to help supply a growing demand for BC wheat.

By Colleen Kimmett

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At 90 years old, Clipper is still as active as ever. She’s had a few parts replaced, tuned and added, but she is still the same machine she was nearly a century ago. After sitting idle for several decades, she was on her way to the Chilliwack dump last year when Jim Grieshaber-Otto rescued and refurbished her to use at Cedar Isle, his 94-acre farm in Agassiz.

The Clipper #6, an antique grain cleaner manufactured in the 1920s, is a sign of the times. Or rather, a sign of the return to a time when small-scale farming was the norm and certain local products weren’t so hard to find. Produce has been the low-hanging fruit for many people wishing to eat local. But local dry goods including wheat, the staff of life, is much more difficult to source in British Columbia. As demand grows, however, more farmers are experimenting with wheat production. What’s lacking, they say, is ready infrastructure to process that wheat -- which is why clunkers like the Clipper are forced out of retirement.

100-mile diet authors spurred grain growth

Until recently, Grieshaber-Otto was just growing a few acres of wheat and oats for his livestock. All that was required was a combine; the horses and cattle didn’t need it hulled, cleaned or milled into flour.

Then two years ago, he heard Alisa Smith and James MacKinnon on the CBC talking about the [100-mile diet](#) quest and how difficult it was to find local



wheat. “I popped them an email saying, what would you like?” he says. And it snowballed from there. The following year, Martin Twigg and Ayla Harker approached him and said they wanted to start an urban grain CSA (community supported agriculture) in the Fraser Valley, similar to the one in the Kootenays. Would he grow wheat for them?

“The possibility of growing a crop that was higher value than hay, the economic benefit, was attractive. Also making connections with people who wanted high quality food and wanted to know where it was coming from,” says Grieshaber-Otto when asked why he decided to jump on board. “And to be honest, Ayla and Martin were so enthusiastic. It was hard to say no.”

That's when he learned "through friends of friends of friends" that a Clipper #6, a brand of grain cleaner manufactured in the 1920s, was available. Once grain has been harvested with a combine (which separates the grain from the stalk, or straw, and then from the inedible chaff around it) it requires cleaning to remove any remaining bits of chaff, straw and foreign seeds. The Clipper does this by sifting the grain through a series of screens.

Cleaning and milling is a "key step along the way, and it's one that I think is lacking in the Fraser Valley," says Grieshaber-Otto. The Urban Grains CSA, which is now managed by [Farm Folk/City Folk](#), has 250 members, about twice as many as they had their first year. With their support he was able to purchase a more modern grain cleaner to clean kernels to an even higher standard.

Their support has also allowed Grieshaber-Otto to increase production and experiment with different types of heritage wheat varieties. "We try and view our farm as part of the community and we like to talk about it that way," he says. "Because we feel it really truly is. I don't consider myself to be the farmer. I couldn't do my job if my wife Dianne didn't have a teaching job in town. It's not about an individual, but rather about a collective cooperative enterprise."

'You have to be really clever at refurbishing'

Joanne and Drew Gailius have been growing grain on their Creston farm, [Full Circle Farms](#), for five years, with the help of CSA members. The first two years they pressed their fresh-milled flours upon friends and family, says Joanne. The following year they joined two other farms that were growing wheat for the 600-member strong [Kootenay Grain CSA](#) (the first in B.C.), and in 2009 they branched off with their own CSA, which quickly attracted 75 members, the maximum they can handle for now.

The Gailius' grow Red Fife and Hard Spring varieties of wheat, along with spelt, oats, rye and garbanzo beans on about one-quarter of their 40-acre property. Once the grains are harvested, using a combine that

separates the grain part from the stem, it has to be hulled and cleaned.

"We have seven different machines," says Joanne, who grew up on a large farm in the Fraser Valley. "All of them we found from old retired small farms from here to Manitoba... one of these was built in 1952. These are really old things but because of his skill he's able to rebuild them. My husband is a heavy-duty mechanic as well as an organic farmer."

"It's very hard to find anything small-scale, and you have to be really clever at refurbishing," she adds. "But we really believe it's the future of our food."

While Full Circle does the grain cleaning, members have the option of taking it to Nelson or Creston, where there are mills that do small-batch processing.

Although a small percentage of the Urban Grains' members mill their own grain at home, the majority don't. For the people who do want flour, the grain is delivered to Anita's Organic Grain and Flour Mill Ltd., a Chilliwack mill that processes its own brand of organic flours and also offers "toll milling" services.

"They've been superb, wonderful to work with," says Grieshaber-Otto. "Having them as a resource makes it possible. If we didn't have that, [the grain] would have to be trucked up to Armstrong."

John Mackenzie, president of Anita's, says that they are asked on a regular basis where the grain for their flours comes from. He says, besides Cedar Isle, they source from the Peace Region and the Okanagan in B.C. "For us local is very important because it's important to our customers; however we will buy product first on quality and availability and then on how close it is to my mill," Mackenzie explained in an email.

"For example, southern Alberta is a great place to buy grain -- great product, lots of supply, and it's only a full day's drive away. People also need to remember that local doesn't just mean from Canada -- eastern Washington is a hot bed for grain growing."

This, says Mackenzie, opens the debate of whether we should buy Canadian products before we buy local products (Washington, after all, is closer than Regina). Also, he points out, as does Grieshaber-Otto, the Fraser Valley is a difficult place to grow grain, in part because of the climate, but in part because wheat crops need more space and land costs are so high.

“If you’re counting on everything being in grain it’s not going to be easy,” says Grieshaber-Otto. “I think people should go into it knowing it’s a risky crop.”

Grow the post-harvest infrastructure

“The production of grains are challenging and does require some things in terms of machinery and a certain level of knowledge and a certain type of land,” agrees Chris Hergesheimer, a co-organizer of the Urban Grains CSA who is also known as the Flour Peddler.

Hergesheimer started his Roberts Creek-based business three years ago, milling locally sourced grain mostly for friends and neighbours on the Sunshine Coast. Since then it’s grown exponentially, and his customer base has expanded to include many in Vancouver. In his first year, he milled 57 kilograms of flour, the second he did 250 kilograms, this year he was up to 1,500 and next year he expects to double that.

Hergesheimer uses small stone mills, “more like table-top mills” that have been sufficient to handle his volumes so far. It takes him six to eight hours to process 100 one-kilogram bags to take to farmers’ markets.

“But I’m not able to meet huge demand,” says Hergesheimer. “I turn down bakery or restaurant orders that may need 50 kilograms of flour in one shot. The scale of my business is very small batch, because I can’t compete economically with a big mill. All I have to go on with the business is that fact that my grain is sourced from very close by -- all of it comes from southern B.C., and that my flour’s fresh.”

Hergesheimer says he could probably sell his product in stores. “It would be challenging in terms of price and consistency and volume,” he explains. “And a big, big part of what I do is educating people about flour, and so to have a bag of flour on the shelf, it can’t speak for itself. Having that available in stores at this point, I’d have to see more uptake from the general public to necessitate that next step and going through those requirements.”

So what are the options to grow the supply of local flour in B.C.? Either small processors like himself will have to get slightly bigger, says Hergesheimer, or a whole lot more will have to come onboard. Either way, we need to start increasing post-harvest infrastructure.

Even in what Hergesheimer calls “short” grain chains, there are at least four or five processing steps -- from combining, to drying, hulling, cleaning and milling.

“We need to grow the harvest alongside the post-harvest infrastructure,” he says, “in order to make sure that the post-harvest infrastructure is in place and is solid to meet that demand if someone were to produce a hundred tonnes of wheat one year and it’s great wheat.

“It’s an important endeavor to chase down that next set of infrastructure.”

This Jar of Local Goodies Brought to You by ‘Co-opetition’

How BC food producers are building up a processing industry based on sharing.

By Jeff Nield

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It's just past opening on a mid-week morning at [Granville Island Public Market](#) and Donna Plough is already managing a steady stream of customers. Despite the early hour she is dishing out samples of sauerkraut to rave reviews and answering questions about how to use a jar of lemon pickle, made from a family recipe. Plough's day-table is loaded with various jars of preserved farm goodness, all of which (except for the lemons) is made from produce she and her family have harvested from their organic farm.

Along with her husband John and their adult children, she farms 20 acres in the fertile Glen Valley area of the Fraser Valley. The aptly named Glen Valley Artichoke Farm specializes in artichokes and mostly sells directly to their customers at farmers' markets and at venues like Granville Island. They add value to their specialty crops by processing their harvest into jars, which they sell under the McColl's label. Although they almost certainly didn't intend it, the Ploughs can be seen as a model for a successful local food system.

Despite our reputation otherwise, we are far from living in a local food utopia in B.C. It's only in the past five years that many local farmers started growing year round, once they realized consumers would buy whatever they could grow.

There are still huge gaps in our food system. The increase in demand for local products has made it clear



that one of the biggest problems we face is not enough supply. A recent report by the [Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#) states that even if we closed our borders and our entire collective harvest entered the local market, we'd fall far short of producing enough food to feed our population.

Local growers need revitalized local processing

Along with the power of institutional purchasing agreements that ensure guaranteed markets for con-

tracted farms, a revitalized processing industry will support producers with alternative markets and the opportunity to preserve their products for sale long after the fresh harvest. A cross-sectoral approach is emerging to support the processing industry in B.C. The private sector, cooperatives, financial institutions, industry associations and all levels of government have a part to play.

In an industry with truly global competition the answer may lie inward. As my series co-writer Colleen Kimmett says, “co-opetition is the new black.” It is in this spirit that we’re seeing a new food processing industry emerge in B.C.

“We’re getting older,” says Plough, hitting at the heart of the matter. And as they grow older the Ploughs are looking for ways to continue their farm business. “We want to progress, we want to expand, we want to employ people,” she says. Having a specialty product like organic artichokes that not many other people are growing may be what puts the Ploughs in a position to allow them to reach those goals, and to help bolster their farming community.

Up until now, the McColl’s product line has been manufactured off-farm at a co-packer. A food co-packer is a business that processes products for a third party. In the case of the Ploughs’ artichokes, they ship the co-packer their freshly harvested artichokes and the co-packer processes them to the Ploughs’ specifications. While the co-packers have done a decent job, what the Ploughs would really like to do is build an on-farm processing facility in order to maintain quality control over their products as well as save on costs.

“For each small farm to put a processing facility on their farm, the cost benefit ratio of it probably wouldn’t be very good,” says Candice Appleby. The executive director of the Small Scale Food Processors Association (SSFPA) is seeing a trend in which people looking to expand their businesses work in conjunction with other people or other companies. This could take the form of a co-operative facility like the Northwest Premium Meat Co-op processing plant in Telkwa, BC, to the classic co-packer like Tarragon

Foods, to a business like Bobo Baby that produces their own line of products but offers the extra capacity in their processing facility -- that they assure is free of the nine most common food allergens -- to other food businesses.

Investors seek community-building ventures

“I don’t think it’s as simple as let’s find a building and put a canning machine on and let’s assume that we’ve solved the problem,” says David Berge, echoing Appleby. Vancity’s senior vice president of community investment says food is an emerging focus area for the credit union’s community investment strategy and food processing and manufacturing is a significant chunk of the sector.

Berge sees great potential in cooperation for local producers. “The stories I like the best are ones where, whether it’s one grower, or one food producer, or one restaurant, whoever is coming to the table, if the person coming is bringing a special strength that they are sharing with other parts of the community.”

He cites an example of a goat cheese dairy in Vermont. The Vermont Butter & Cheese Creamery started as a small farm-based enterprise. When the owners built a new, modern creamery they laid the foundation for a high-value, farm-based niche that now services 21 family farms. Berge says any investment-seeking local food-based business that has a solid commitment to local growers would be more attractive to a lender like Vancity because all players are building the community together.

‘Lots of room for food production here’

“It takes about three minutes to do an artichoke, to get the bottoms out, but this machine does 30 in seconds.”

Back at Granville Island, Plough is talking about a machine she saw on a recent trip to a Spanish artichoke farm. She is contemplating importing such a machine in order to ensure that all the artichokes from their annual seeding of 35,000 plants get harvested and processed. Couple that machine with a processing facility and it’s easy to imagine the Fraser Valley as a

hotbed for local jarred artichokes.

“In particular the challenge is how do we focus on the areas of food production where there really is a value add, where there will be available at the end of the pipe some sort of premium pricing,” says Berge. Although the cost of processing goods in B.C. is still, in many cases, more expensive due to lower labour costs and subsidized production beyond our borders, there is opportunity to start rebuilding our lost processing infrastructure.

“I think there’s lots of room for food production here in B.C.”

Secrets to Supporting Local Food

What the Tye Solutions team learned in BC and Ontario while reporting this fall's 'Growing the Local Bounty' series.

By Colleen Kimmett

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One doesn't have to look very far to find people dedicated to creating a different kind of food system. A system that supports local farmers, respects the environment and is based on equity, fairness and common sense -- not to mention good taste.

This fall, we reporters -- Colleen Kimmett, Justin Langille and Jeff Nield -- traveled to two of the most productive agricultural regions in the entire country: Ontario's Greenbelt and British Columbia's Fraser Valley. Our goal was to examine the challenges, opportunities and barriers to creating this kind of food system.

What we found was that local food systems are flourishing at a community level. Farmers' markets are growing at a national rate of 30 per cent a year, pumping \$3.1 billion dollars into local economies. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects, like Urban Grain or Home Grow-In in Vancouver, have no trouble finding members, doubling or tripling their numbers in the first few years.

We learned that some farmers will go to great lengths to supply customers with what they can't find on the supermarket shelves. Like Jim Grieshaber-Otto in Agassiz, B.C., who found and refurbished a 90-year-old grain cleaner to supply local flour to a bunch of city folks, or Karl Hann in Abbotsford, who drives to Vancouver from Abbotsford three times a week to deliver fresh organic eggs right to his customers' doors. In Elmira, ON, we met a group of Mennonite farmers



who invested cooperatively in an auction warehouse, a kind of one-stop shopping for local retailers who don't have time to deal with individual farmers. Deb Reynolds at Home Grow-In convinced Fraser Valley farmers to invest in a distribution centre and retail store for local products on a busy street just blocks from Vancouver's City Hall.

We learned that, despite the troubling statistics about agriculture, young people are getting into farming and

finding success with small-scale production geared specifically for farmers' markets. In Brampton, Ontario, we spoke to Eric Rosenkrantz at the [McVean Incubator farm](#), who, along with his business partner, pulls in \$25,000 off each of his three-acre plots each season. "If I'm getting by, and this is working, then I'm happy," he told The Tyee. "The business, I realize, can grow if my production methods improve and I get a bit more land."

We visited the Kwantlen University's farm school, one of a handful of venues in B.C. where eager students can learn the ins and outs of, what program director Kent Mullinix refers to as, human-scale food systems. UBC's 8-month long Sowing Seeds sustainable agriculture practicum is entering its fourth year. Much like the Kwantlen program, it's a mixture of practical classroom learning and hands-on experience.

Scaling up is key

So if we have people willing to grow food locally, and people willing to buy it, what's the problem? Essentially, it's a matter of scaling up.

Our predominant food and farming system is designed to serve distant markets, not local ones. The reason why primarily comes down to cost. When Ontario's minimum wage increased to \$10.25, farmers like the Pfenning family found it even harder to compete with growers in California who pay their workers half that.

"People have to understand that \$10.25 an hour minimum wage means that their potatoes have to cost more, they have to," says Pfenning. "The true cost of production has to be paid."

The wage differential is compounded when you get into processing. In 2008, the closure of a CanGro canning facility in Niagara forced at least 150 farmers to rip up fields and peach and pear trees because they suddenly had no market. The pending closure of a Bick's pickles plant in nearby Delhi, Ontario, will impact some 200 cucumber growers nearby.

"This decision will provide greater manufacturing and sourcing flexibility, enabling us to be more cost-competitive," a Bick's spokesperson told the local paper.

While it's hard to imagine life without lemons, or coffee or sugar, it simply doesn't make sense to export or import products we can grow here. And the gap in the post-harvest processing sector is one in which jobs and money drain away. How many jobs?

[Local Food Plus](#) (LFP), a Toronto-based non-profit focused on local sustainable food production did some calculations. Executive director Lori Stahlbrand says they found that, in Ontario, if 10,000 families spent 10 per cent of their food budget specifically on local food, it would pump enough money into the local economy to create a hundred new jobs. LFP's mandate is to link large institutional and commercial buyers (like universities and restaurants) with local, sustainable certified farmers.

"These institutions are spending millions of dollars on food every year," says Stahlbrand. "We write the language that goes into the requests for proposals for food service contracts. It helps to scale up the whole system, it helps to educate the public through these institutions, it's a part of how these institutions can meet their climate change requirements."

Building a soft infrastructure

This kind of soft infrastructure -- relationships and business networks -- are just as important as barns, warehouses and processing plants.

In Vancouver, New City Market is a vision of a food hub that would serve as space to store, sell and buy local food, but also a place for public education around food. Food hubs like this one are viewed as essential to creating a local food system. But they have to be designed to serve the specific needs of a specific community.

Like [The Stop Community Food Centre](#). When it first opened its doors in Toronto's Davenport West

neighbourhood in the early '70s, it was one of the first food banks in the entire city. Now it offers the emergency food bank service -- a three-day supply of food, twice a month -- plus members can drop in for a meal four days a week, grow their own vegetables in a community garden, buy discounted produce at a weekly farmers' market, or take cooking classes.

The Stop works on the premise that without food infrastructure, viable farms, civic engagement and personal empowerment, food banks are simply a stop-gap measure in the fight to eradicate hunger. Even in Canada there is significant class disparity when it comes to access to food; never mind local sustainable food. Food bank use spiked sharply in 2008/09 during the recession and continues to climb. In a typical month this year, 80,000 people in Canada used a food bank for the first time.

The Stop's program director, Kathryn Scharf, says that food is a way to make poverty and social justice relevant to everyone -- because everyone eats. Everyone enjoys a good meal. And for the first time in her career, Scharf feels that this is a moment, that food is a galvanizing force with the potential to incite real change. This was a common sentiment amongst many people we talked to, including farmers and food activists who are close to retirement. Now is the time for political leadership and comprehensive planning.

"We are going to need something much more comprehensive than farmers' markets," says Scharf. "The scale of the solution has to match the scale of the problem."